No. 48

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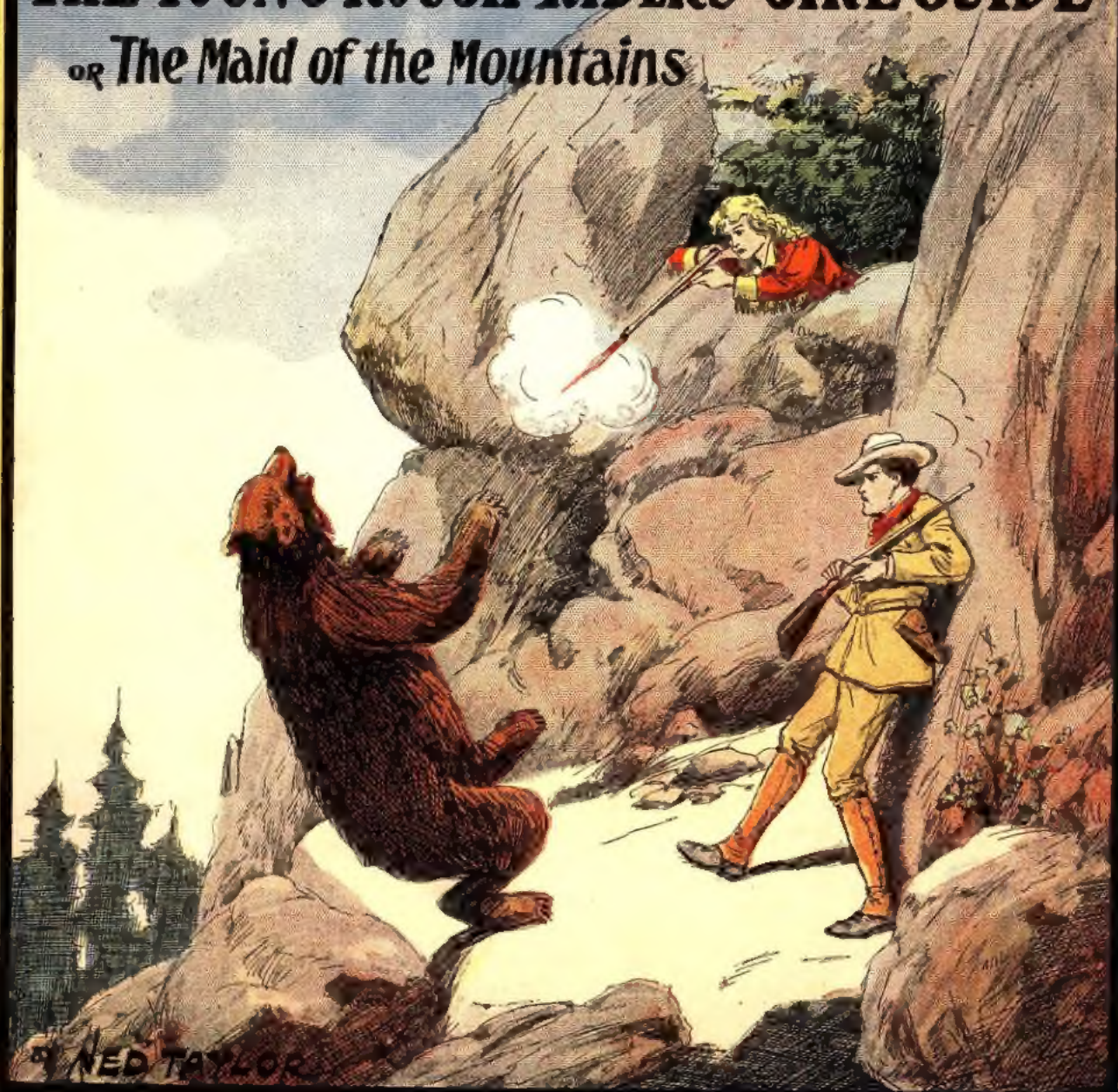
Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER'S GIRL GUIDE

OR The Maid of the Mountains



A shot rang out, and the bear lurched and staggered. "Stay were you are," called a girl's clear voice. "I will take care of this animal."

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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The Young Rough Rider's Girl Guide;

OR,

THE MAID OF THE MOUNTAINS.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

A HUNTING TRIP.

Bang!

The report of a rifle echoed loudly through a narrow pass in the Rockies.

A deer, which had just trotted out of a clump of timber toward a stream that flowed at the bottom of the pass, leaped into the air and then toppled forward, dead.

Three figures, clad in khaki cloth, sprang out from behind a clump of bushes.

All three carried rifles.

A slight curl of smoke was still coming from the muzzle of one of them.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said one of the three, a slim, wiry chap with long, yellow hair hanging down on his shoulders. "Thet thar was a good shot, Ted."

"One of the best that I ever saw made," said a broad-shouldered fellow, who looked to be as strong as Samson.

The third of the trio, the one who had been addressed as Ted, said nothing at all.

He moved forward with so light and swift a step that he reached the fallen deer before either of his comrades.

As he bent over looking at it, he made a figure that anyone would have looked at a second time.

He was dressed in close-fitting, khaki clothes, cut after the military style, with a brown sombrero on his head and wearing leather leggins instead of boots.

He had a compact muscular figure that indicated that he was accustomed to a life of constant activity in the open.

This was Ted Strong, the young rough rider, famous throughout the West as the leader of a band of boys known as the young rough riders and as one of the best shots and finest riders that had ever been known on the frontier.

He was out on a hunting trip in the Rockies with his two friends.

Bud Morgan was the name of the fellow with the wiry form and the long, yellow hair. He had worked as a cowboy all his life before he had met the young rough rider.

The heavily built, powerful fellow was Ben Tremont, who before he had come West to help Ted Strong to run a

ranch, had won the intercollegiate championship for weight lifting and all around athletic development.

Ben and Bud had reached the side of the fallen deer a moment after the young rough rider.

"We are sure of something for our supper," said Ted, looking up at them with a smile. "We prowled around the greater part of the day without getting anything, although I had heard that this range of hills here was one of the best for big game in the United States. Trappers and hunters told me that the San Juan Mountains were really a paradise for the hunter."

The three boys were in the foothills of that range that runs from the northern part of New Mexico into Southern Colorado.

It is part of the great chain of mountains that runs the whole length of the country and is known as the Rockies.

This particular range was the San Juan.

It was one part of the country that the young rough rider had never explored hitherto, and he had looked forward to this hunt, which was to take him into the very heart of the range, with a great deal of pleasure.

Bud had bent over the fallen deer, hunting knife in hand, ready to start the operation of quartering, when a rifle report rang out from the timber out of which the animal had come.

A bullet whistled so close to his head that he could hear the song of it.

Bud was on his feet in an instant, his hunting knife dropped on the ground, and his rifle in his hand.

The other two boys, who had strayed down to the edge of the stream to drink, whirled around suddenly and looked at the ridge of timber out of which this shot had come.

They did not have long to wait.

Out of the timber, an instant later, dashed a young fellow, carrying a rifle in his hand.

He pointed it at the head of Bud Morgan.

"Get away from that deer!" he said. "Don't you lay a hand on it!"

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud, staring at the fellow who had given this peremptory order. "What does yer mean, pard?"

"I mean what I say. The deer is mine."

The young fellow seemed to be in a flaring rage.

He was a well-built chap, with blue eyes and fiery red hair.

He was dressed in a suit of hunting clothes that had evidently been made by some swell tailor.

To judge from the pallor of his skin, he was not one who had ever done much hunting or other open-air work.

Behind him appeared two fellows in fringed hunting suits.

One of them was a half-breed, of a sickly, yellow color but powerfully built.

The other was, or rather, had been, a white man.

At the present time, he was so bronzed by continual exposure and so darkened from the fact that it was seldom if ever he indulged in the luxury of a bath, that it would have been very hard to tell what his original color was.

They both carried rifles, and they stepped up behind the young fellow who claimed the deer in a very threatening manner.

Ted and Ben, seeing what was going on, ran forward and backed up the cowboy in the same manner.

For a moment the six stood facing each other in this fashion.

Every one of the six had a rifle in his hand.

They were alone in the midst of a vast wilderness.

They all knew that in that region the most desperate and bloody fights arose out of situations just like this one.

They were all prepared to shoot at a moment's notice, and yet no one there wanted to make a move, feeling that any movement on either side might precipitate the fight then and there.

The boy who had spoken first broke the silence again.

"What do you fellows mean by starting in to skin that deer that I have been following for half the day?" he said.

"I shot the deer," said the young rough rider. "I think that it gives me some sort of claim on it. This is not a place where there are any particular game laws in force, as you ought to know."

"Game laws or no game laws, that deer belongs to me."

"Not unless it's a pet deer that you have tamed or purchased from some one."

"I hunted this deer for half an hour. The three of us have been stalking it."

"I shot it."

"How do I know you shot it?"

"You heard the crack of my rifle. There it lies dead."

"I fired at it back nearly half a mile. I followed it up since. It dropped dead from the effect of the wound that I gave it."

"Are you sure that you gave it a wound at all?"

"Of course I am."

"Better look at it first and see."

"I know that I fired at it and that it staggered."

"Where did you hit it?"

"On the flank."

"Quite sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Then I guess that the deer belongs to me, then."

"What!"

"Just what I said. And I advise you to keep your rifle resting on the ground where it is."

As the young rough rider spoke, he executed a lightning-like move with his left hand.

A revolver had been drawn out of his belt and leveled before the others knew what had happened.

If the young rough rider had attempted to raise his rifle which was in his right hand he would have attracted the attention of the others.

But this move of his was so quick and sudden that none of them saw it until it had been executed.

Then they stared in surprise.

It seemed impossible that the boy could have drawn and leveled a weapon in such a small space of time.

The boy who claimed the deer had been on the point of raising his own weapon, but before he knew it, he was looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

"You see that I have you covered," said Ted, in calm tones. "I can put a bullet through your head in less time than it would take for you to move your hand an inch on the stock of your gun. Your companions see it also. If they move or try to raise a weapon there may be something doing."

A grim smile appeared on the faces of Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont.

They knew Ted Strong and knew his marvelous speed and accuracy with a revolver.

They really felt that the young rough rider was capable of holding the three up, single-handed.

The boy who was facing him was evidently taken by surprise.

His face paled a little as he looked at the steady barrel of the revolver that menaced him.

He cast a glance at his two companions.

They had both fallen back a pace.

They seemed as much at a loss as he was.

They were old guides, and they knew from the speed with which the young rough rider had developed his weapon that he was not one to trifle with.

One glance at them convinced the boy that they could do nothing to help him.

He had heard of things like this when he read about the West in books, but he had never dreamed that a man could get the drop on him this way.

He was silent for a moment.

His lips seemed to have become suddenly dry, for he licked them frequently.

"What do you mean by holding me up this way?" he gasped, in a sort of a choking voice.

"Nothing at all," said the young rough rider.

But the same time the weapon never wavered a fraction of an inch.

"It seemed to me that we had a little difference of opinion a moment ago. You claim that you shot that deer," continued Ted.

"I thought I did."

"I want you to look the deer over and examine it. If you find a wound in the flank, it is yours. I put a bullet through the neck."

"I guess you are right."

"You are not sure though. Just examine the deer and make sure. It is best to be sure about these things. Then there will be no dissatisfaction afterward."

"You could shoot me in the back when I stooped down," said the boy.

The strain was beginning to tell upon him.

His face had grown paler and paler, and his hands shook so that he could scarcely hold the barrel of the rifle, the stock of which rested on the ground.

"I could if I wanted to. I could shoot you through the head now with less trouble, and your two guides know that I could swing the revolver round and send a couple of shots in their direction without any trouble."

"If you are a robber," began the boy, "I have some money——"

"I'm not a robber. I want you to look at that deer and see if it is yours."

"Take the gun away, then. It might go off at any moment."

"So it might. You had better examine the deer. After that we can talk more sociably together. I'm getting tired holding this revolver. You had better hurry."

The boy cast a last, frightened glance at the glittering weapon and then fell on his knees beside the deer and looked over it.

He leaped to his feet a moment later.

"It is your deer," he said. "I thought I had shot it. I missed it."

"I thought so," said the young rough rider. "Now, if you are out of meat, I will give you half the carcass. After this, you will find it wiser not to be so sure in your opinions."

CHAPTER II.

THE QUARREL IS SETTLED.

"I made a mistake," said the boy, who was still pale with affright and looking nervously at the revolver in the hands of the young rough rider.

Ted returned the weapon to his belt.

"It is all right now," he said. "Only you are making a mistake in acting the way you did in a wilderness like this."

An expression of great relief crossed the face of the boy when he saw that the glittering revolver was no longer in the hands of the young rough rider.

He at once recovered his composure, and the rather conceited expression which his face habitually wore, returned to it.

"I would have examined the deer, anyway," he said. "I would never have claimed it unless I was sure that I shot it."

"Would yer?" muttered Bud Morgan, in an undertone. "You didn't act like that when you first come runnin' outer ther woods."

The boy, of course, did not hear this remark of the cowboy's.

"I suppose since we have met," he said, "that I might as well introduce myself. My name is Clif Jackson. I am out here on a hunting trip. These are my guides—Steve Crane and Yellow Jack."

"We didn't expect ter meet any people here," said Crane, who was the white guide.

"No paleface often come up here," muttered Yellow Jack, the half-breed. "You get too fresh with um gun—ain't healthy."

"What's thet yer say, yer yaller half-breed?" shouted Bud Morgan. "Don't you begin ter lectur ther young rough rider or I'll hop on ther back of yer neck."

The half-breed cast a very surly look at Bud.

For a moment his hand trembled on the hilt of the knife which hung at his belt.

But as it was there, a sharp click sounded out which caused him to look in the direction of the young rough rider.

Ted seemed to be busy examining the lock of his rifle.

But the half-breed noticed, all the same, that it was at the full cock and that its muzzle was pointed straight at his breast.

His hand dropped away from his knife in a hurry.

Evidently these three strangers were not people who could be trifled with or taken unawares.

The young rough rider answered Clif Jackson as though he had never noticed the motion of the half-breed.

"My name is Ted Strong," he said. "These are my friends, Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan. We are also out here on a little hunting trip."

"From the East?" inquired Jackson.

"Them ther fellers air never from the East," muttered Crane. "They air too durn slick with ther weepins fer thet."

"No, we are not from the East," answered Ted. "We came up here from Texas. We spend a good part of our time on a ranch down there."

"I have some friends in Texas," said Jackson. "Perhaps you may know of them. What part of Texas do you come from?"

"Dimmit County—the Las Animas Ranch," said Ted.

"What! The Las Animas? I have heard of that ranch!"

"And well yer might have," put in Bud Morgan. "It's ther best gol-dinged ranch in ther hull United States."

"Have you ever heard of the young rough riders?" went on Jackson.

All three of the young rough riders smiled.

Even Ben Tremont, who was usually as silent as the grave and who had now sat down on a rock to smoke his little, black pipe, gave vent to a deep-voiced chuckle.

"Yes;" said Ted. "We have heard of the young rough riders."

"They own the Las Animas, don't they?"

"To my best knowledge, they do."

"And you fellows are from there! Why——"

Clif Jackson drew back a pace and gazed at the three boys.

"What can I have been thinking of?" he cried. "You have the khaki clothes that I know they wear. And now I remember it, the name of the leader of the young rough riders is Ted Strong! You must be the young rough rider yourself!"

"I have to plead guilty!" smiled Ted.

"Well to think of that!" said Jackson. "And I started in to row with you. Why, if I had known who you were I would have never said a word about that deer."

He dashed forward and seized Ted's hand once more.

"I am awfully glad to meet you," he said. "I am from California. I had heard of the young rough riders out there. My uncle runs a ranch out in Fresno County. He said that he once paid a visit to the Black Mountain Ranch in Dakota and the Las Animas Ranch in Texas. He said that the young rough riders ran both of these ranches, and he said that they were models. I have heard lots about you fellows. I have read about the fights that you have had with outlaws and cattle thieves, and how you had to struggle against a rival rancher who tried to beat you by fair means or foul, and who had plenty of money back of him, too. You don't know how glad I am to meet you fellows."

This impulsive youth shook hands with the young rough riders all the way around once more.

He would have gone on talking had not Ted Strong interrupted him.

"It is getting late in the day," he said. "It is warm here now, but as soon as the sun drops behind those hills there it will come on very cold. It is time that we were getting our camp ready for the night. Where are you camping?"

"We were going on to a hunting lodge further up in the mountains that one of my guides has built. But we are late, I am afraid. If we could camp with you tonight I would like it very much."

"We are roughing it a good deal," said Ted. "We intended to put up a little shelter of saplings and brushwood."

"And it's goin' ter be gol-durned cold sleepin' on ther ground," said Bud Morgan.

"Mighty cold," said Ben, between the puffs of his pipe.

"That is just the thing above all others that I would like," said Jackson. "I want to rough it in the genuine border fashion."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud Morgan. "You'll do that all right if you stay with us."

"T'd like to camp with you fellows, if you will let me," said Jackson. "I'm not afraid of roughing it."

Ted was not particularly desirous of the company of this young Californian.

He saw from his appearance that the boy had been brought up in luxury, and that he did not really know what "roughing it" meant.

But he did not see how he could refuse to have him stay with him without being impolite.

"You have no guides," said the boy. "And if you let me come with you, I am sure that you will be welcome to mine."

"We came in here without guides, and we do not think that we need any," said the young rough rider. "But if you wish to stay with us and take pot luck with us, I am sure that you are welcome to do so. You will find, however, that camping out without anything but the barest necessities is not all that it is cracked up to be."

"You will find that I can stand it all right," said Jackson, in a self-confident manner. "When I was at school we used to camp out a part of every spring. I always enjoyed it."

"Well, I hope that you will enjoy this. But it is time we got that deer skinned."

"My guides will do it for you," said Jackson. "That is a part of their work."

He turned to his two men and called them over to him.

They had been standing off from the others, muttering between themselves in a low tone, and casting anything but pleasant looks at the young rough riders.

"Here Steve and Jack," said Jackson, "I want you to get to work on that deer and cook some supper."

"We go to lodge to-night," said the half-breed. "Cook supper there."

"No we won't go there. It is getting late."

"No camp here," said the half-breed, shaking his head, doggedly.

"We will camp wherever I say," said Jackson, in a loud voice.

He was evidently a boy who had been used to having his own way in anything that he chose.

He did not take kindly to opposition.

"Bad place for camp," said the half-breed. "Go on to lodge."

"No, we won't go on to the lodge. What did I pay you for, anyway? Are you the boss here or am I?"

Jackson went up to his underling in a very threatening manner and looked him in the eye.

The half-breed was big enough to have crushed the boy with one hand.

There was no doubt, also, that when his savage nature was really aroused that he would be a very dangerous man

But at present his savagery lay dormant, as it does in many half-breeds.

He seemed to be a stupid, slow-witted fellow, without much mind of his own.

"You the boss, all right," he said, in answer to Jackson's question.

"Then go ahead and get that deer skinned, and let us have no more talk about it. I paid you to do what I told you to, and you are going to do it or you get no more money out of me, understand?"

The half-breed turned away and slouched over to the deer, but at this moment Crane, the white guide, stepped forward and stopped him.

"Don't touch thet deer, Yaller," he said, "till I git through talkin'."

Then he turned to Jackson and touched his hat awkwardly.

"Before anything furder is done," he said, "there is a few words thet I wanter say ter yer."

"Go ahead and say them then," said Jackson, staring at him in astonishment.

"It's jest this. Yer hired me ter guide yer up inter ther San Jewan Range, didn't yer?"

"Certainly I did. But what has that got to do with Yellow Jack's refusal to skin that deer?"

"Wait a minit. I'm comin' ter thet. Yer hired me and told me ter get such other guides as I needed. I got Yaller, there."

"And he's a peach. A yellow dog would have been better."

"Hull on a minit. Don't run away so fast. Yaller's all right. He knows this here country, and, although he doesn't say much, he's a good man if you treat him right."

"I don't want to listen to this. He'll have to do as I say——"

"Hull on a bit. Don't git impatient. It's this way. I'm ther recognized guide ter ther mountings up here."

"Yes, I know that."

"An' nobody venturs inter this range without I lets 'em have my services."

"So I have heard."

"Well, I was hired ter guide yer an' not no other party. Yeller Jack goes with me. We was hired tergether. Now yer wants us ter guide not only yer, alone, but a party of three gents what we ain't never seen before."

Ted Strong had been listening to this conversation in silence, but he broke in now.

"Look here," he said, addressing Crane, "I came in here with my friends for a little hunting. I don't want your services as a guide. I want you to understand that."

"I'm not volunteerin' my services as guide," said Crane. "But if I'm ter look arter five men instid o' one an' keep them from shootin' themselves, I orter git better paid."

"I don't need your assistance to keep from shooting myself," said the young rough rider.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" howled Bud Morgan. "Did yer ever see ther likes of that. He has ter keep ther young rough rider from shootin' hisself! Unlimber yer shootin' iron Ted an' show him."

"Everyone knows as I am ther best shot in ther San Jewan country," growled Crane.

"We're from Missouri—we wanter be showed," howled Bud. "Show us some of yore gol-dinged shootin'."

"I don't hafter," said Crane. "There ain't nobody here as kin shoot with me."

"I'll put up fifty plunks yer can't shoot with ther young rough rider."

"I don't intend to enter into any shooting contest," said Ted.

"I guess not," sniffed Crane. "Yer knows as how yer'd git beat."

"Don't take thet from him, Ted," yelled the excitable Bud. "Don't take thet from him. Show him what yer kin do."

"He cain't do anything with me," said Crane.

"I'll back Crane as the best shot around here," said Jackson.

Ted was silent for a moment.

Then he turned sharply to the guide.

"You claim that you are a much better shot than me?" he said.

"I don't claim it. I know it."

"Well, you know it. You are willing to back yourself against me."

"Sure."

"You want more money out of Jackson because you are going to guide the whole party, as you claim?"

"In course I do. I'm entitled to it."

"Seeing that I don't want your services as a guide, I might have something to say on that score myself. But I am not going to say it now. I am going to let that matter drop—for the present. How much would you want as your pay for the extra work that will fall upon you and your companion when you act as a guide for us as well as for Jackson?"

"One hundred and fifty dollars."

"That is just one hundred and fifty more than you are worth. But you have been saying something about your shooting. You think that you have me beat at it. Perhaps you have. My friends want me to shoot against you, and I want to give you a chance to see what you can do in that line. I am willing to shoot against you. If I win, we don't hear any more from you on the subject of extra pay. If I lose, I pay you one hundred and fifty. Remember; I am not making this offer because I think that your services as a guide are worth anything. I can go through this country myself and find just as much game as you can. But I want to see how well you can back up your words in the matter of shooting."

"That's ther talk," cried Bud. "Jumpin' sandhills! It takes ther young rough rider ter clip their wings for them."

"Make him put up or shut up," grunted Ben Tremont, between puffs at his pipe.

Crane seemed somewhat taken aback at this sudden proposal from the young rough rider.

He had never thought that the boy would take him up so promptly.

He had no doubt, however, that he could beat this young fellow when it came to shooting.

He was famed, far and wide, as the best shot in all the district, and he never as yet had met his match.

He had been practicing shooting with rifle and revolver for the greater part of his spare time during all the years that he had been living there about the mountains.

It was his business, as a hunter, to shoot and shoot straight, and he did not believe that this boy had the faintest chance against him.

For all that, there was something in the tone of the young rough rider's voice that gave him to understand that he was talking to one who could not be beaten easily in anything that he undertook.

He hesitated for a moment.

"I haven't seen the color of your money yet," he said, weakly.

"That trouble is soon remedied," said the young rough rider. "I know that it is not good policy to carry a large fortune about in a place like this, where there is no particular respect for the law, but I guess that I have enough for the present occasion."

"Yer kin have all I have," shouted Bud. "Count me as backin' ther young rough rider ter ther last cent in my pocket."

"I guess that you can ring me in on the game, too," said Ben Tremont. "I don't want to let any of these soft snaps slip past me."

In the meantime, the young rough rider had taken a flat, leather pocketbook from an inside pocket and drawn forth from it four bills.

One was a hundred-dollar gold certificate.

There were two twenties and a ten.

"I put these in the hands of Clif Jackson, as stakeholder," he said. "You don't have to put up any money. But if I win you won't collect any more, I can promise you that."

Crane glanced at the bills and saw that they were genuine.

"Well," he said, "I don't know as I want to rob you of your money, but since you are determined, I'll go you." His confidence had returned, and the look of the new, crisp bills made his fingers itch to get them.

A cunning light shone in his eyes now.

"When does yer want this contest to begin?" he asked.

"Right away."

"It's gettin' darker an' darker."

"There will be good light for half an hour yet. And it is just as dark for me as it is for you, anyway."

"All right, then, I'm ready."

Crane took up his rifle and began to examine the lock.

"Do you want me to shoot first?" he said.

"Yes," said the young rough rider. "You shoot first, and if I don't do everything you do, as well as you do it, the money is yours."

This looked like a reckless offer on the part of the young rough rider.

It meant that Crane was to set the pace.

It gave him an advantage.

He might try some trick shot which he himself had perfected, and which would be new to the young rough rider.

But there was a gleam of determination in Ted's eye.

He had listened very quietly to what Crane had said, but, all the same, there was something in the man's manner and general attitude which had irritated him exceedingly.

He wanted to take him down a peg if such a thing were possible.

Crane was delighted at this offer.

He smiled all over his face.

"Set up a target, Jack," he said to the half-breed. "We'll show this feller thet he is not quite so much as he thinks."

CHAPTER III.

THE SHOOTING CONTEST.

The half-breed had evidently helped Crane in contests of this kind before.

A greasy smile shone on his countenance.

He eyed the money that Jackson held crumpled up in his hand.

He expected a share of the proceeds after it was won, for he was a regular henchman of Crane's, and always had a share of any good fortune that came in his superior's way.

He moved over to a tree some little distance from where the others were standing and hung his battered cap on one of the limbs.

It was on one of the smaller twigs.

It was hung just about as high as his head.

The twig which supported it could be seen between the cap and the main branch.

"Now," said Crane, picking up his rifle, "I'll show yer. I'm not goin' ter hit that hat. I'm goin' ter hit ther twig that supports it. Yer'll see ther hat drop ter ther ground, and when yer look at it ther won't be no bullet holes in it, neither. Here goes!"

He raised his rifle, and, after aiming for about three seconds, fired.

There was a sharp crack as the bullet cut its way through the twig—perfectly distinct from the report of the rifle which preceded it by the least fraction of a second.

The hat—as Crane had predicted that it would—fell to the ground.

Jackson ran over and picked it up.

"There are no holes in it," he reported.

"All right," said Ted. "I have seen things like that done before. I'll try it."

"A heap o' good tryin'll do yer," sneered Crane.

"Hang the hat up again," said Ted.

The half-breed hung the hat to another twig.

If anything, this was a harder shot than the one which Crane had made.

The twig was shorter and slimmer.

It was harder to hit without touching the hat.

"You've given me a harder shot than you gave yourself," said Ted.

"Oho!" said Crane, with an insulting laugh. "Yer beginnin' ter git skeery about it already, are yer?"

"No, I can't say that I am. I like to get a square deal, though. But I guess that in a little thing like this, it doesn't make so very much difference."

As the young rough rider spoke there was a crack and a puff of smoke from his rifle.

He did not seem to have taken aim.

He had not raised the rifle fully to his shoulder, but had only elevated it about halfway, and was still holding it without the rest that his shoulder afforded when it went off.

Seemingly, he had not cast more than a glance at the mark at which he was firing.

But as his shot rang out the twig broke and the hat fell tumbling to the ground as before.

There was a yell of astonishment from Jackson and the two guides.

They thought, at first, that the young rough rider had discharged his gun by accident.

When they saw the hat tumble to the ground they were surprised, to say the least of it.

Bud and Ben did not say anything.

They had seen the young rough rider shoot before, and they had more of an idea as to his ability than the others had.

"There," said Ted, looking coolly around, "I don't think that you will find that I have touched the hat."

"Yer sent a bullet through it; I saw it shake," said Crane, between his teeth.

"Did I? I think not. Jackson, will you be good enough to examine the hat?"

Jackson, who was as much surprised and in doubt as

Crane himself, went over and looked at the hat and then at the twig.

"It's all right," he said. "He cut the twig clean and true. There is the mark of the bullet. And the hat has not been touched."

"Hooray!" yowled Bud. "Ther young rough rider forever!"

"I'd like to send a shot in your direction," gritted Crane, glaring at him.

"Sorry I can't let yer do it," said Bud.

"That shooting was wonderful," said Jackson. "He did not seem to take aim at all. You took aim. I could see you sighting the weapon. But the young rough rider just fired without looking. So far as I could see, he took no aim at all."

"Neither he did take any aim," said Crane, whose face was now as black as a thundercloud. "The gun went off by accident, and it happened to hit ther mark. It is a thing that wouldn't happen again in a thousand years. He was cute enough to take advantage of it—that's all."

Ted heard this remark, but he pretended not to hear and paid no attention to it.

Not so Bud Morgan.

He had heard it also; it had stirred his blood to the boiling point.

He ran up to Crane and shook his fist in his face.

"Don't talk any more like thet, yer maverick, or I'll tie yer into a bowknot," he cried.

"Yer durned little lunatic, I'll break your face," said Crane.

The two glared at each other.

It looked as if they might either strike or fire at each other.

The young rough rider interfered.

"Here Bud," he said, "this is a shooting contest. It isn't a fight. We can attend to all that business afterward."

"All right, since you says so," said Bud, stepping away from the guide. "But thet feller is goin' ter get it good an' swift from me some of these days."

"I'll attend to you, all right," growled Crane.

"Look here," said Ted, "if there are any other tricks that you know, try them. It is getting darker. We want to go on with this."

"I've got plenty more," said Crane. "Hev yer a target of any kind? I'll try yer with a revolver."

At the word from Crane, the half-breed dashed away and returned with a portion of the inner bark of a birch tree which was as white as snow.

On it, with a piece of charcoal that he took from the pocket of his hunting shirt, the guide traced the outlines of a target.

This was hung on a tree, and then Crane fired at it with his revolver.

He emptied the six chambers with fair rapidity, but there was no doubt that he was taking a careful aim each time.

He thought that he would surely have the young rough rider beaten when it came to revolver shooting.

The boy might be able to beat him with a rifle.

He did not know about that.

He did not know whether to think that the shot that had been made by the boy had been an accident or not, but he was convinced that no accident could help the boy at this kind of shooting.

When he had emptied all the six chambers of his weapon the target was taken down by Ben Tremont and held up so that all could examine it.

Crane had done good shooting; there was no doubt of that.

There were two holes in the dead center knocked into one.

He had struck twice in almost the same place.

There were three holes in the inner ring and there was one hole in the outer ring.

"There!" said Crane, when all had examined it. "I guess that my money is safe. I guess that you won't beat that no matter how lucky you are."

"I'm going to show you that luck has not as much to do with my shooting as you seem to think that it has," said the young rough rider.

"How air yer goin' ter do that?"

"Put up another target and I'll show you."

Another target was prepared, an almost perfect duplicate of the former one.

Crane marked it out with such swiftness as showed that he had practiced this sort of thing often before and was an expert at it.

It was hung up on a tree.

The young rough rider drew his weapon and took up his position at a spot that was slightly in the rear of the place where Crane had stood when he was doing his shooting.

Revolver shooting, as a good many of the readers doubtless know, is a very different thing from rifle shooting.

In fact, shooting with a revolver, as practiced by the real experts at the game, resembles practice with a shotgun rather more than practice with a rifle.

When a rifle is used it is sighted and the aim is taken by getting the sights properly aligned on the object at which it is fired. In the ordinary Colts there are sights, or, rather, there is one sight over the muzzle, but this is rarely used by your true "gun fanner," as the expert revolver shots are known in the West. They aim in a different fashion. It is more by a sense of feeling than by the eye. The eyes are fixed steadily on the object aimed at, not on the weapon. Then the revolver is raised till it seems to the man who is shooting to be pointing directly at the target. It is on this ability to point

straight, as it were, that the skill of the pistol dead shot depends—especially in rapid-fire work. If one stopped to sight the weapon, the rapidity of action, which is often necessary to a cowboy, would never be attained. Besides, experience has shown, that the hand is steadier when no time is wasted in taking aim.

Ted Strong was fully aware of all these facts. He knew the reasons for them, as he had made a special study of scientific shooting with a revolver. He had noticed that Crane had fired with his gun across his bent elbow, after the fashion adopted by a good many shots. Ted looked on this as a sign that Crane had not mastered the true principle of shooting with a revolver. He had learned to sight and fire very quickly, but still he sighted the weapon, and he was not so sure in his aim, after all, as one who fired after the manner adopted by the young rough rider.

Ted did not make use of his other elbow in taking aim at all.

He stood for a moment facing the target and looking fixedly at it.

Both his arms hung idly at his side.

One of them—the right—clasping the revolver, firmly but not tightly.

Suddenly, he raised the weapon.

He fired, and he fired so quickly that the reports from all six chambers seemed to be blended into one continuous rattle.

For a second there seemed to be a perfect stream of fire spouting out of the muzzle.

The young rough rider was firing just as rapidly as he could work the gun, and as it was a revolver of the very finest make that he had ordered according to his own specifications, especially for his own use, it was pretty rapid.

The six chambers were empty before those watching fully realized that the young rough rider had started to fire.

They stood looking at him while he dropped the smoking weapon, "broke" it, and began to slip fresh shells into it out of his web belt.

Crane, uttering an oath, started toward the target.

"I never saw no shootin' like thet before," he growled. "I think yer crazy. I don't believe as how yer has hit ther targit at all."

"Wait a minute before you look at it," said Ted.

Everybody stood still and gazed at the young rough rider.

"Why should I wait?" said Crane.

"Because I want to tell you where I have hit the target."

"Tell me where you has hit ther targit?"

"Yes, tell you where I have hit it. I did not want to put all six bullets into the dead center or bull's-eye If I did that, it would be hard to tell how many of the bullets had struck there, and you would claim that some of them had never struck the target at all."

"That's what I do claim. No man could shoot at a leedle target like that as quick as you did an' hit it with half ther shots."

"That's what you claim before you have looked at the target," said Ted. "I am going to tell you where you will find the bullet holes. Then you won't claim anything at all, I expect."

"I'll find them nowhar."

"You'll find them where I tell you. You'll find one of them in the dead center—that was the first one I fired. You will find the others in the inner ring. Now look and see."

"Yer crazy. Fer a bluff, this beats anything thet I ever seed."

"Look at the target before you say anything more."

Crane bounded over to the tree, took the target down from it and gazed upon it.

The others, with the exception of the young rough rider himself, crowded behind him and looked over his shoulder.

They found it almost as Ted said they would find it.

There was one hole in the dead center, there were four in the inner circle, there was one that was on the line, half of it in the inner circle, half of it in the outer circle.

They burst into exclamations.

"What did I tell you?" cried Bud Morgan, leaping into the air and cracking his heels together. "What did I tell yer? Ther young rough rider is ther champeen dead shot of ther West, an' ther ain't no mistake about it, nuther!"

"Mighty good shooting," grunted Ben Tremont, filling his pipe afresh.

"The best I ever saw," said Jackson.

"Hit the mark all right," said the half-breed, in his guttural tones.

Crane was the last to speak.

He stared at the target for a moment or two like a stupefied man.

Then he tore it into shreds, cast it on the ground, and stamped it beneath his feet.

"Won't do yer no good gettin' in a temper like thet," said Bud. "Yer cain't never hope ter shoot agin' ther young rough rider, so what's ther use of tryin'?"

"I'll show yer what's ther use of tryin'," said Crane, controlling himself, although the flashing of his eyes showed that he was still boiling within. "I'll show you that I'll beat him yet."

"You'd better hurry up," said the young rough rider. "If you don't beat him within the next fifteen minutes there won't be any chance for you."

"All right," said Crane, snatching his rifle from the ground. "I've got a trick that you can't equal. You remember that you was to do what I did?"

"Perfectly."

"And if you didn't you would lose?"

"I know that. There is no use repeating it."

"I wanter understand ther terms, thet's all. I have made up my mind ter git that thar money."

"Go ahead and get it."

"An' yer will stand by yer first agreement?"

"Certainly."

Crane drew a nail out of his pocket and with a few blows from the butt of his revolver drove it into the trunk of the tree so that it stood out vertically at the side.

He paced off twenty paces and then raised his rifle and sighted it carefully.

He fired.

He ran forward to the tree, looked at it, and broke out into a yell of delight.

"Do that if yer can!" he said.

"I'll try it, though it's getting dark. Put in another nail," said the young rough rider.

Crane did so, and the young rough rider raised his revolver.

"This is with the rifle!" yelled Jackson, stepping forward.

"I know it," said Ted, firing as he spoke. "Look at that nail. See if a revolver bullet won't do the trick just as well."

It had done the trick.

Crane had driven his nail into the tree with a rifle bullet.

The young rough rider had accomplished an infinitely harder task in doing the same thing with a revolver bullet.

There was a yell from everyone but Crane and the half-breed.

The half-breed seemed as stolid as usual, and Crane looked at the nail which had been driven in, in a sort of stupefied manner.

"Now," said Ted, turning to the guide, "you have shown me some of the tricks that you can do and I have tried to imitate them. Here is one of my own."

He pulled a cartridge from his belt.

"You will see," he said, "that I have not drawn yet. I will toss this in the air and then draw and fire at it."

The cartridge went spinning up into the air, and the young rough rider's hand moved to his belt.

His revolver flashed out.

It cracked.

At the same time there was a report in the air above.

The bullet had struck the cartridge and discharged it.

The young rough rider turned to Crane.

"Can you do that?" he said.

Crane tossed his hands into the air.

"I'm beaten," he said. "I can't do nuthin' like thet."

CHAPTER IV.

JACKSON IS AWAKENED AT NIGHT.

There was nothing more from Crane.

He knew that he was beaten.

Besides this, the skill in handling his weapons, which the young rough rider had shown, made him think that it would not be a good plan to trifle very much with him.

At first, he had been disposed to treat him as a mere boy who could be easily bullied and cowed, but a boy who could do this sort of thing was as dangerous, he thought, as any man he had ever met. He gave up the idea of winning the hundred and fifty with a grunt of disgust.

Then, too, he had agreed to act as a guide for the whole party in case he lost the shooting match.

He said nothing, however, but busied himself in making arrangements for a camp, the half-breed lending him his assistance without a word.

Under this arrangement, the three young rough riders had far less to do in the way of hard work, but they would have preferred to be by themselves, nevertheless.

There was no doubt that Clif Jackson was an exceedingly smart, cocky youth, with a hot temper and an arrogant manner, which came from the fact that he had been used a great deal to having his own way at school and at home.

He was the son of wealthy parents, and as he was an only child, he had been humored in every way and allowed to follow his own inclinations so much that he was "spoiled," as parents sometimes say of children who are very hard to keep within bounds.

While supper was cooking over the camp fire which had been kindled down among the fir trees at the brink of the river, while the venison steaks were hissing over the hot embers, and the coffee pot was sending a fragrant steam up into the night, he sat and talked with the young rough rider.

Ted could easily see that the boy had been used to having his own way in everything.

He knew that if he stayed with him he would have to learn to defer to the opinions of others a little more and lose some of his conceit.

He did not want the boy in his party, nor did he want the two guides.

But he felt that it might be a dangerous thing to leave these youths alone with the two frontiersmen.

He had a feeling about him that they were crooked, and in this wilderness they would have the Eastern boy at their mercy.

He tried advising Jackson to give up his hunting in that region for the present.

"We have struck very little game here," he said, "and I think that it would be a good idea for you to try some other part of the mountains further south."

"I don't want to go there," said Jackson. "I have

found that this San Juan Range is the wildest and most unexplored part of the country. I want to go where few other white men have been before. I want to have some thing to boast of when I get back to my home. I want to be able to say that I have seen the very wildest part of the country."

"A good many other men have wished to say that, too, perhaps," said the young rough rider. "And a good many of them have never come back to tell about it."

"Killed, you mean?"

Ted nodded.

"There's no danger of Indians here," said Jackson. "There are no tribes nearer than the reservation."

"Indians are not the only danger that there is in a country like this."

"What other dangers are there? I would like to know."

"There are wild animals. There are grizzlies in these mountains, and a good many of them."

"That is just what I am looking for. I came here to hunt. You don't think that I am afraid of a grizzly bear, do you?"

"I think that you might well be afraid of them."

"What! You think that! The young rough rider! I thought you were an old hand at hunting and all sorts of things like that."

"The more experienced a man is, the more cautious he is about tackling a grizzly. They are dangerous animals. It is only the tenderfeet who think that they are not to be feared."

"Pooh! That kind of talk makes me tired. There is no use talking to me that way. Grizzlies have been hunted for years. Years ago when there was nothing but muzzle loading rifles, they were hunted and shot. I have the very best rifle that money can buy."

"A good rifle does not always mean success."

"What? You think that I would not be a match for a grizzly, single-handed?"

"I would not like to see you taking any such risk."

"When I was armed with my rifle?"

"Armed or unarmed."

"You think that I am not a good shot, perhaps."

"I didn't say anything of the kind."

"But you meant it, and that is worse. You did not have the courage to speak your mind."

There was no doubt that Clif Jackson was in a rage at being spoken to in that way by a boy who in years was not very much older than himself, no matter how much older he might be in experience.

"Look here, Ted Strong," he said, "I know that you are a good shot with rifle and revolver. I saw what you could do this afternoon. But that does not give you any right to crow over other people. You don't know whether I can shoot or not, but you have no business insinuating that I can't."

"I wasn't insinuating anything of the kind," said the young rough rider.

"You were. You said that it would be a dangerous thing for me to tackle a grizzly bear."

"Yes; I still say it, too. I know that it would be a dangerous thing for, not you alone, but for anyone, to tackle a grizzly. That doesn't mean that you can't shoot or that you are not able to take care of yourself."

"All right," said Jackson, "I'll show you before long that I can come pretty near handling game as well as you can yourself. This is not the first time that I have gone hunting in my life."

"Supper's ready!" bawled Bud from the fire. "Hurry up an' pitch in."

The young rough rider was glad that his conversation with Clif Jackson had come to an end.

He did not want to quarrel with the boy, but he could see that, owing to the fellow's overbearing temper, it would be hard to avoid doing so.

Jackson moved over to the fire without saying anything more, and during the meal that followed talked to no one.

The young rough rider could see, from the expression of his face, that he was still angry and that he was thinking over, in his mind, what the young rough rider had said to him.

After supper Jackson produced a pack of cards and began to do some tricks with them.

He was really rather skillful with the pasteboards, having learned some card tricks from a professional and practiced until he was exceedingly proficient with them.

He astonished his two guides, as well as Bud Morgan, with his skill, but Ted and Ben had seen such things done in the East before and knew how they were performed.

Crane and the half-breed seemed to have gotten over their sulkiness altogether, although there was a look in the eye of the white guide that Ted did not altogether like.

As for the half-breed, his expression was so stolid, except when his face expanded into a greasy smile, that it was utterly impossible to tell what he was thinking of most of the time.

After Jackson had tried about all the card tricks that he knew, Crane proposed that they play cards.

A blanket was spread out on the grass, close beside the fire, so that the light would shine over it, and the party gathered about there for a game of euchre.

It was quite cold, now that it was dark, but wrapped up in their blankets the party was fairly comfortable.

The game went on for about half an hour without any break, and then Jackson tossed his cards down on the table.

He was a poor loser, as might have been expected, and he had been losing steadily at this game.

"This is dead slow," he said. "I'm tired of it. Let's try something else."

"I think the game is all right," grunted Ben, who, as usual, was puffing away at his pipe. "I'm quite contented to go ahead."

"Me too," said Bud. "I'd ruther play euchre nor eat at ther present moment."

"It's stupid," said Jackson. "I don't see any fun in it."

"That's because there's nothing up on the game," said Crane. "If you was playin' fer a leetle stake each time it would be better."

"Sure," said the half-breed, showing his teeth in a grin. "Heap good think. Play for money—more fun."

"That's right," said Jackson. "It is funny that I did not think of that before. If we were playing for money it would be a great deal more fun. We are sitting here like a party of nice little girls playing cards for toothpicks. Let's make it for money."

"A quarter a game," said Crane.

"Sure!" said the half-breed.

"I'm game," said Bud Morgan.

"All right, then," said Jackson. "It's a quarter a game from this on. Go ahead, Strong, it's your deal."

He pitched the cards over toward the young rough rider, but Ted did not pick them up.

"Look here, fellows," he said. "I don't want to interfere with your game, but you must count me out on this."

"What's the matter?" asked Jackson.

"I don't want to play—that's all."

"But you were willing to play a moment ago."

"I was willing to play when there were no stakes up."

"But you object to playing with us for money. Are you afraid that we won't play fair?"

"Not at all. I object to gambling on principle."

"Do you mean to say that during all the time that you have been in the West you have never played cards for money?"

"I don't mean to say anything of the kind. But I do mean to say that I never played except for some purpose outside the game. I have played twice or three times for money, but it was not for the money that I played."

"Yer talkin' in riddles," said Crane.

"I played both times for the purpose of exposing a cheat who was taking advantage of his opponent to steal his money from him."

"You didn't play for the purpose of winning some money yourself?"

"Not at all. I am opposed to that sort of thing, as I said, on principle."

"Well," said Jackson, "I don't see why you should not join in a friendly game with us."

"I guess as how he's afraid to risk his money," said Crane, with a sneer.

"Don't talk that way about ther young rough rider," said Bud Morgan, his blue eyes snapping dangerously. "By ther jumpin' sandhills! you'll find that it ain't very healthy ter talk thet way about him."

Crane became silent, but he flashed an angry look at the cowboy.

"You saw me risk my money this afternoon, when I was shooting with you," said Ted. "That ought to show that I wasn't afraid to risk it."

"There he goes," muttered Jackson, under his breath, "boasting about his shooting again. I guess that is about all that he can do."

To tell the truth, Clif Jackson was very envious of the superior skill that the young rough rider had shown, and, although he was outwardly polite, he had taken a sort of a dislike to him.

He saw that Ted was his superior and that he could not bully him around as he always had other boys of his own age.

He could not stand this.

"Well," he said, turning to the young rough rider, "are you going to come in this game or are you not?"

"Count me out," said Ted.

"Why can't you be sociable and come in?"

"I told you why, already," said the young rough rider. "I object to gambling on principle. I think that it is wrong."

"I never heard that you were such a sissy as all that."

"I don't think that makes me a sissy."

"Well, I suppose the game can go on without you. Here, Tremont, the deal falls to you, now."

He pitched the cards over to the big fellow, but Ben did not touch them.

He was busy filling his pouch.

"Count me out of this, too," he grunted. "I don't take any stock in card playing."

"All right, you needn't play if you don't want to," said Jackson, in an irritated manner. "I guess Morgan, being an old-time cowboy, can play."

But Bud Morgan surprised him more than the other two.

"I dunno's I wanter play," he said. "Yer kin count me out, too. I don't think as how I believe in gamblin', nuther."

"You don't mean to say that you have lived all your life in the West and never gambled?"

"You wanted to play a minute ago," said Crane.

"Oh, I have played keerds," said Bud. "I've played draw poker, an' stud poker, an' faro, an' roulette, an' all ther rest of ther games that a feller kin lose money at, but I'll be gol-dinged if I play any more."

"You were ready enough to play a moment ago."

"That may be, pard. But I hadn't thort it over a moment ago. The point of it is this, I know that gamblin' is wrong. It caused ther death of my brother. I

didn't think at the first when yer perposed this here game fer money. But now, I'm dead agin' it. I ain't got no objections ter ther others' playin', but I don't play myself."

"These fellows seem to be regular lick-spittles to the young rough rider," said Jackson, in a tone that Crane alone would hear.

"They make me tired," said Crane, "but deal out ther cards yerself."

"There's no fun when only three play," said Jackson, addressing Ted. "You fellows have spoiled the game by backing out."

"I'm sorry," said Ted. "I certainly don't want to spoil your fun. I am perfectly willing to play if the game is not for money."

"Oh, you know very well that it is no fun playing when there are no stakes up. All we can do is to sit here like so many fools, twiddling our thumbs and wondering when the evening will be over."

"I don't know how late you usually sit up when you are in camp," said the young rough rider.

"I sit up till I feel sleepy," said Jackson, snappishly.

He was in decidedly bad humor now, for he had been disappointed at his failure to start a game of cards for money.

"An' I suppose yer gits up when yer gits awake," said Bud.

"I get up when I'm good and ready."

"Well," said the young rough rider, "as I intend to break camp at daybreak to-morrow, and as I want to get some sleep, I think that I will turn in now."

The three young rough riders had brought with them, into the mountains, a burro fitted with a pack.

A horse was not able to get along and keep its footing over that rough ground.

Out of the pack Bud hauled three heavy buffalo robes.

The three young rough riders rolled themselves in these, but in such a way that they could drop them off and leap to their feet at a moment's notice without being impeded with the folds.

They had always made a practice of sleeping this way when they were in the open, and they also slept with their rifles within reach of their hands.

Experience had told them that this was the safest way.

They were soon rolled in their robes and lying down with their feet to the fire.

Jackson and the other two sat looking at them for a while.

Then they also decided that it was time to go to bed. They unrolled their blankets, and it was not long till the whole camp was in silence.

Clif Jackson was in a bad temper when he turned in.

He had met with more opposition that day than he had encountered in a long time.

Being of wealthy parents, he had found in the past that he could generally have his own way with everyone he met.

When he started into the mountains, his two guides had been subservient to his every wish.

They knew that he was very wealthy, and they thought that if he were friendly to them it would mean a good deal of money in their pockets.

But when Jackson had encountered the young rough rider, he had found that things were different.

He had really thought, at the first, that the deer had died from a wound which he had given it.

He had not heard one report of the shot with which the young rough rider had brought it down.

He had been enraged beyond measure when Ted had disputed the ownership of the deer.

The promptness with which the young rough rider had covered him with the revolver had given him a shock that he would not recover from for a long time.

It had been Ted's eyes that had really cowed him far more than the weapon with which he had covered him.

There was something in those eyes that he could not explain.

He knew, at once, in looking into them, that he had met a boy whom he could not bully around as he did others.

When the examination of the deer proved that the young rough rider was right, he had been more surprised than ever.

To learn who the young rough rider really was had been another surprise.

Then he at once had formed the notion of joining Ted Strong, of whom he had often heard.

He was sorry now that he had joined forces with his.

In the first place, it had started a row with the guides.

That had been the first time that they had rebelled against his authority in the very least, although he had previously ordered them around to suit his fancy.

Now, he wished that he had let Ted go his way.

There was no doubt that the young rough rider would be master in the camp.

The incident of the card playing showed that Ted would get his way.

Jackson ground his teeth when he thought of this.

He determined to leave the camp in the morning and go off with his two guides.

With this determination, he felt more peaceful and began to grow a little sleepy.

The fire was still burning, having been arranged by the young rough rider so that it would be ablaze for the greater part of the night.

But all the rest of the camp was still.

Everyone else was asleep.

At last Jackson fell asleep, also, but not into a quiet slumber.

Troubled dreams chased each other through his head.

He seemed to be pursued by bears, and at last one of them caught him by the foot.

He pulled it and awoke.

Something had him by the foot. It was not a bear, but a man.

"Get up," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Don't make no noise. I want ter speak ter yer in private."

Jackson sat up in his blankets and stared.

It was the face of Crane, the guide, that was looking into his.

CHAPTER V.

CRANE'S PROPOSAL.

Crane, the guide, did not go to sleep in his blankets when he lay down, although he had appeared to do so.

That was the appearance he had intended to convey, but he had no intention of going to sleep then.

He lay awake and listened while the others, one by one, dropped asleep.

In the silence of that mountain camp, broken only by the cheerful crackle of the fire, it was possible to hear the breathing of every one of them.

Crane lay in his blankets a little further from the fire than the others, so that the light from it did not fall directly upon him.

At the same time he had a good view of all the other recumbent figures.

He could see them without their seeing him.

He could see Bud Morgan, the cowboy, rolling restlessly about until at last he fell into slumber.

He could see Ben Tremont stretch himself, knock the red ashes out of his pipe and fall asleep.

He could see the young rough rider become still and motionless, wrapped in slumber.

Yellow Jack, the half-breed, was lying behind him, and Crane knew that he would either lie awake or sleep after the manner of an Indian—with one eye open.

He, himself, watched and waited.

At last he was perfectly sure that all of the party were asleep.

Then he slipped silently out of his blankets.

He had not been a hunter and a trapper all his life without having learned the knack of speedy and noiseless motion.

He now slipped out of his coverings without a sound.

And he left them in such a position that, by the dim light which the fire cast over them, he seemed to be still sleeping where he had lain down.

He slipped silently over to the side of Yellow Jack.

The half-breed did not stir.

He opened his eyes, however, showing that he was wide awake.

"Look here, Jack," said Crane, in a whisper, "we don't wanter train with this bunch any longer."

"Ugh," grunted the half-breed; "they no good."

"You are right they are no good. We want ter git our stuff and take a sneak out of here. And what is more, we want ter stop the young rough rider from going up further into these hills."

"Good!" said the half-breed. "Steal their guns, too?"

"Yes!"

The half-breed crawled out of his blankets with a movement that resembled that of a snake more than anything else.

He was as silent as a snake, and he seemed as deadly and as slippery.

"Good!" he grunted, in a whisper. "Fix the guns and go now."

"Wait a minute," said Crane. "Not so fast."

"Why, wait?"

"We wanter take that fresh kid, Jackson, away with us."

"Why we want him? We got him hundred dollars he paid. Him no good."

"He may be no good in himself—but he is good for more money. If he didn't turn up home safe and sound there would be an inquiry about him, wouldn't there?"

"Sure."

"And it would be found out that he had started off into ther San Jewan Mountains, taking us with him as his guides."

"Ugh!"

"And we wouldn't git any more jobs guidin' people. It's folks like him we can git money out of. We have scared the rest of them out of this place, and they think that it isn't safe to hunt up in here without they have us ter guide 'em around."

"That's right."

"And that is the way we want to keep it. We want to take charge of Jackson, and we want to scare the young rough rider out of here. Now you wait here, while I go and awake Jackson."

The half-breed lay down in the grass, while Crane crawled stealthily forward to the place where Jackson was sleeping.

It has already been told how he awoke the boy and cautioned him to keep silence.

Jackson did not understand it at all.

For a moment he sat up and stared at Crane as if he were completely bewildered.

"Don't git skeered," said the guide. "An' don't make a sound. I woke yer up this way because I wanted ter talk ter yer now in private. Crawl out of yer blankets this way a leetle inter ther dark there. I wanter talk ter yer."

Jackson felt a little scared.

"Why don't you talk to me in daylight?" he whispered.

"Because I won't have a chance then. Because I wants

ter talk ter yer without ther young rough rider hearin' what I says. Come on. Don't be skeered."

"I'm not scared," whispered Jackson, crawling out of the blankets.

If there was anything in the world that the boy prided himself on it was his courage, and he could be induced to take all sorts of desperate risks in this manner.

He moved out of the blankets at once when Crane told him not to be frightened.

"Crawl back there in the dark," said the guide. "Yer'll find Jack there."

He remained for a moment behind the boy and arranged the blankets so that if any of the three rough riders did awake and cast a glance in that direction they would think that the boy was still asleep there.

Then he arose to his feet and stepped noiselessly off into the dark, where he soon joined Jackson and the half-breed.

They were out of earshot of the others, so that it was possible for them to converse here without any fear of awakening them.

Jackson, thus aroused from his slumbers, looked very pale and nervous.

He shivered with the cold and clearly was puzzled a great deal as to what it all meant.

"What do you want with me at this time of night?" he said; "and what do you mean by dragging me out here? It's cold, I tell you."

The boy's teeth chattered.

He was not so hardy or inured to a life in the open as the two guides.

"Sit down a minit an' I'll explain ter yer. Yer'll thank me fer wakin' yer up when yer hears what I have ter say."

Jackson sat down.

"Say what you have to say quickly," he said. "I'm cold here, and I want to get asleep again."

"We was hired ter guide yer through ther San Jewan Mountings an' ter take yer ter ther places in it whar there was ther most game," began Crane.

"I know that," said Jackson. "There is no need to wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me that."

"That isn't all thet I has ter tell yer."

"Well, hurry up with the rest."

"I'm hurryin', boss. I'm not so slick a torker as some of yer fellers wots been eddicated at ther schools an' collidges of ther land. But I'll come ter ther point. I wasn't hired to guide ther young rough rider through these mountings."

"Oh, rats!" said Jackson, who was beginning to recover his courage. "I thought that we had thrashed out all that before."

"No, we haven't thrashed it all out. We haven't begun ter."

"You agreed that if the young rough rider won that shooting contest there would be no more talk about extra money."

"I don't believe he won that on ther squar. He did shootin' thet I ain't never seen no man do before. There is some gol-dinged trick erbout it. Yer may depend on thet."

"Whether there is a trick or not, it doesn't make any difference. That is no reason why I should be called out to a mysterious gathering in the middle of the night like this. You must be crazy. I'd rather pay you the money three times over than be frozen half to death this way. This will give me my death of cold."

"When you've been roughin' it as long as I have, yer won't be so skeered about colds. But I don't want the money from yer. Ther p'int is this. Ther young rough rider isn't ther right kind fer me ter get along with. He's no durn good."

"I'll shake hands with you on that," said Jackson, brightening up a little when he saw that there was some one else who shared his dislike for the young rough rider. "I had heard a great deal about him, and I thought that he must be pretty good. But I find that he is one of the most insolent, overbearing, conceited individuals that I have ever seen in all my born days. I'm sick of him."

Crane saw that he had struck the right tack when he started in to abuse the young rough rider.

He saw that talk of that kind would please Jackson more than anything.

His eyes lighted up with a cunning gleam.

"We air sick of him, too," he said. "An' we ain't goin' ter go no furder with him."

"You mean that you are going to cut out and leave."

"Yes."

"Now?"

"To-night."

"Why couldn't you wait till daylight?"

"I'll tell yer why. If we left by daylight he might make some kind of talk."

"You are not afraid of his talk, are you?"

"No; I'm not. I'm goin' ter talk ter him myself. I'm goin' ter talk ter him later on, but, when I do, I won't be in no position where he kin get ther drop on me like he did on you this arternoon."

"He won't do that to me again."

"Maybe not. But he won't do it to me at all. That's what I want to make sure of. And I have a whole lot to say ter him, an' he'll have ter do jest as I say or take ther consequences. Ain't that right, Jack?"

"Ugh!" grunted the half-breed. "That's right."

"What do you mean? What is it that you want to talk to him about?" said the puzzled Jackson.

"I'll tell yer. Yer know as how Jack and me is ther only guides ter these here hills. Yer know as there ain't no other guides ter be got."

"I know that. I know that you have a monopoly of it and that you charge people just what you please."

"That's what you call it—a monoperly. That's what these yere big trusts have. That is what is good in any big business. That's what Jack an' me has. An' we didn't get it without scrappin' fer it, either. Other fellers came in here an' sot themselves up fer guides. They tried ter cut us out of ther business. But Jack he allers stuck ter me an' I stuck ter Jack, an' we fought 'em. We skeered 'em all outer ther business. One by one, they dropped out because they was skeered of us. Now we don't want this yere monopoly of ourn stopped. We wanter continue ter be ther official guides, an' we don't want other people buttin' in."

"But what has all this to do with the young rough rider?"

"A hull lot ter do with it. Yer see it's this way. He comes along here without any guide at all, an' he goes inter these mountings. Arter that, he'll like as not offer ter take people in fer northin' at all. It would be just like ther durned upstart ter do that. He thinks he is ther whole show because he happens ter have a leetle money."

"He hasn't so much money as all that. My father could buy and sell him without knowing the difference."

"Sure he could. But we don't want Ted Strong buttin' in here. An' he's gotter be skeered outer here. Nobody kin come inter these mountings without paying us, kin they, Jack!"

"Ugh!" grunted the half-breed again. "That's right."

"Of course it is right. We will have ter skeer Ted Strong outer ther mountings. Now we don't want yer ter git inter no trouble. We want yer ter leave with us."

"What? To-night? Now?"

"Sure."

"I don't want to start now. There isn't any way of starting now."

"I'll give yer a tip. It'll be a good deal safer fer yerself if yer start now. There won't be no safety fer ther young rough riders when they is alone in these yer San Jewan Mountings. Folks has called them ther haunted mountings, an' I guess ther three young rough riders will think thet they is haunted all right afore they gits outer them."

"What do you mean to do? Do you intend to make an attack on them?"

"Never mind what we mean. We'll look out fer you. Thet's why we woke yer up."

Crane glanced over at the three sleeping forms of the young rough riders.

He felt that it was his duty to warn them of the fact that the guides were slipping away and that there was a plot on foot to drive them back out of the mountains in which they had come to hunt.

But he felt rather frightened, himself, and he remembered how the young rough rider had covered him with his revolvers and made him ridiculous with his followers.

"Where do you intend to go now?" he said, turning to Crane.

"Up to our lodge, higher up. Yer'll git all ther big game yer wants, an' yer'll have a nice, warm house with a roarin' fire in ther fireplace ter sleep in nights."

Jackson shivered.

The prospect of a comfortable log cabin with a blazing fire lighting up the hearth was very inviting.

His teeth were chattering.

The chill of the mountain air had seemed to strike to his very bones.

He glanced back at the three young rough riders again.

He remembered that he had forced himself into their acquaintanceship, and that he had treated the young rough rider as though he meant to be his friend.

He felt that he would be doing a very mean thing, to say the least, to sneak off and leave them without any warning as to what the two guides were planning to do.

At the same time, he was rather afraid of Crane and his morose, half-breed companion.

He felt that that half-breed, with his glittering, beady eye and evil mouth, was a man who would plunge a knife into him at a word from Crane.

He felt terribly alone with them out here in the dark.

He wished, now, that he had spoken aloud and called the young rough rider when Crane had first awakened him.

There was a struggle going on in his mind, a struggle between the enmity that he felt toward the young rough rider and the disinclination that there was in him to play this trick—a struggle, in a word, between the good and bad in his nature.

"He made yer look like a fool ter-day," said Crane. "It will be your chance next."

Those words ended the struggle in Jackson's mind.

He wheeled around at once.

"I'm ready now," he said.

"Injun Jack hes our stuff packed on the mule," said Crane, "yer needn't mind about thet there blanket o' yourn. It can lay there. We kin get others up thar."

"What's Injun Jack doing?"

The half-breed was crawling forward on all fours.

He seemed like a snake as he slid so noiselessly toward the three sleepers.

"He's fixin' their guns," said Crane. "Don't bother about him."

He turned away, and they made their way among the trees to the point where their mule was tethered.

As Crane had said, the pack was already made up on its back, and it was in shape to start at once.

Crane came to a halt.

"We'll wait fer Jack here," he said. "Then we'll push on."

"I'm awfully cold," said Jackson, with a shiver.

"You'll git warmed up with walkin' an' it won't be long till yer git up ter ther log cabin. We kin soon start a blaze thar."

"Here comes some one," said Clif, starting back.

"It's Jack," said Crane. "I know his walk. He walks like he was an out-an'-out redskin. He's done ther job, all right. Yaller Jack ain't much of a talker, but he's pretty slick at some things, all right."

The half-breed joined them a moment later.

"Well," said Crane, "how did you make out?"

"Heap good."

"Draw ther charges out of their rifles?"

"Sure. Couldn't get at ther revolvers."

"All right. If Ted Strong meets a grizzly an' tries ter shoot it ter-morrer he's liable ter get clawed some."

Jackson shuddered, but they were already started, and he felt that there was no going back now.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GRIZZLY.

It was early the next morning that the absence of the guides, together with Jackson, was discovered.

Bud and Ben had slept steadily all through the night.

Ted had awakened and found the half-breed crouching near him.

The half-breed said that he had come there for a drink out of the tin pail of water which had been drawn from the river and placed near the spot where the young rough rider lay.

Ted had handed him a dipper filled from it, and Yellow Jack had drank from it.

The young rough rider felt thirsty, and he had taken a drink himself.

While he was tipping the dipper up to drain it, the hand of the half-breed had slipped out toward the rifle.

It had covered the lock so that it would not click.

Then his other hand had shot out and the charges from the weapon had been drawn.

This was according to the instructions of Crane.

Already the half-breed had drawn the charges from the weapons of the other two boys without awakening them, but he had found the young rough rider a lighter sleeper and more on the alert than the others.

He had asked for a drink in such a stolid way, and had shown so little sign of any expression on his face, that the young rough rider had not expected that there was anything out of the way going on.

He had seen the half-breed crawl away as silently as he came, and when he disappeared in the shadows, he thought that he had gone to lie down again.

He had lain down himself and slept soundly till morning, when he awoke before either of the other boys.

It was then that he discovered that Jackson and his two guides were missing.

He wakened his friends and told them about it.

"I'm glad they are gone," grunted Ben. "They were no use to us. They were only a bother."

"I don't think much of those two fellers," said Bud, "and ther boy is a fresh kinder kid, too."

"Now I know why the half-breed was prowling around in the middle of the night," said Ted. "They must have slipped away very quietly."

"It was some kind of a put-up job that that feller, Crane, had planned out," said Bud. "Jumpin' sandhills! That there feller had a bad eye. I didn't like ther way he looked at all. That's why he picketed out his mule so fur away from ther camp."

"I suppose that he thinks that he is doing a smart thing in leaving us this way," said Ben Tremont, "but I know that I, for one, did not want them about."

"I did not like to turn Jackson away when he was so anxious to join," said Ted, "but I can't say that I wanted either him or his guides in our party. I do not know where he has gone with those guides of his."

"They are a tough-looking team, all right," said Bud. "I don't think as how the kid is safe alone with them there fellers."

"He is safe enough," said the young rough rider. "They might feel like holding him up and robbing him, but it would not be to their interest to do so. They know that he is the son of a wealthy man, and that a search would be put on foot for him if he did not get back to civilization in safety. It is known that he entered these mountains with those fellows for his guides. We heard that ourselves before we started. They are the only guides to this range, and we would have had to wait till they got back if we had not decided to go ahead without any guides."

"Yes," said Bud, "an' a lot o' them mavericks back thar told us not ter go ahead without a guide. They said as how it was dangerous."

This was the only conversation that the young rough riders had over the disappearance of Jackson and his two hirelings.

They were glad enough to get rid of them, and they did not trouble themselves any further than taking a look at the trail and seeing the general direction in which they went.

In glancing at this trail, the young rough rider saw another trail which riveted his attention at once.

It was a sign that is unmistakable to the true Westerner, the trail of a big grizzly.

There is no hunter who does not thrill a little when he sees the tracks left by this great beast, the deadliest and fiercest of all the Western animals.

Ted immediately called to the other boys and showed them the track.

After that, it did not take long for them to snatch their breakfast and arrange their supplies on the back of their pack animal.

They snatched their rifles up from the ground where they had lain and started at once along the trail.

It led in the same general direction as the track that had been left by Jackson and his two guides, but, presently, it diverged off over to the right and took them up into higher country, where it became dryer and rockier.

The great paw marks were plain and distinct.

There was no doubt that the bear had been there a short time before.

Bud Morgan, who had been running ahead scrutinizing the trail, came to a stop, suddenly, with a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" he cried. "There is another b'ar here. Look at the track. It jines this one."

Ted rushed forward and looked.

It was as Bud had said.

There were the tracks of two of the great animals now instead of one.

"It runs along beside it," said Ted. "And it is fresh. Let us push ahead on it for all that we are worth."

They did push ahead at a trot, the trail winding higher and higher up among the trees that clothed this side of the mountain.

Presently, the mule, which Ben Tremont was leading, shied violently and came to a halt.

Ben pulled and tugged, but the mule refused to budge another step, setting its four feet firmly in the ground and standing as stiff as if it were rooted there.

"The critter knows ther b'ar sign, all right," said Bud. "There ain't no use a-yankin' an' a-pullin' at it. Yer cain't make it go no further."

"I don't blame it, either," said lazy Ben Tremont, "it doesn't want to stack up against a grizzly, and I think that in that respect it is showing more sense than we are."

"It will have to be left here," said the young rough rider.

"I'll stay with it," said Ben. "You and Bud can go forward. I have done enough hard running and walking up hills for one morning."

"And you don't want to get a shot at the grizzly?"

"If I hear you fellows fire I will run forward, all right. If you are going to catch Mr. Bruin at all, you will catch him soon. If not, you will find that he has gone into some hole in the rocks out on the ledges above here and that you have had your long tramp for nothing."

Both Bud and Ted were eager to get a sight of the bears.

They knew that they could not be very far away.

They were glad that Ben was willing to look after the mule.

They did not stop to debate the matter with him, but, wheeling around and carrying their rifles at the trail, started up on the tracks of the two bears at a faster pace than before.

The track, as Ben had said it would, led up and up to the very edge of the woods.

Then the two grizzlies, who had traveled thus far together, seemed to have parted company.

One set of tracks ran along for a little distance through the woods, only to disappear among the trees.

The other went straight on up the mountain, which above this point was clearer and free from trees.

"We'll separate here," called the young rough rider to Bud. "You take the one that runs along to the side. Be careful now, and if you find your animal kill him with the first shot, if you can."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud. "I'll be keerful, all right. I ain't a-takin' no chances with a grizzly b'ar. I've seen too many on 'em for that. See you later."

The cowboy, with his flaxen hair streaming out behind him, had darted away among the trees and Ted was left alone.

He turned and held straight on up the mountain.

It was steep climbing now, and the slope grew more and more precipitous the higher he got.

While the trees lasted, the trail was easily followed, for it was deeply printed on the soft earth.

But on the higher slopes, on which the trees did not grow, it was more difficult.

The ground was harder here, and the tracks of the big bear grew fainter and fainter.

Higher still there were no tracks at all.

The young rough rider found himself looking up toward a succession of shelving rocks far too hard to leave a trace of anything that had passed over it.

He was near the summit of the mountain.

There was no doubt that the grizzly bear had taken one of the numerous passages that led up the side of the mountain twisting about among great bowlders that lay there.

But which one?

That was the question to be answered.

A bed of gravel which looked as if it had been disturbed recently answered the question for the young rough rider.

He started up this way at top speed, moving silently, nevertheless, and with his eyes strained to catch the first glimpse of anything in front of him.

Then he did catch sight of a great, shaggy body moving about among the rocks.

He stopped, tingling with excitement from head to foot.

It was the grizzly, and it was moving about on a rocky ledge a short distance away.

Luckily the wind was blowing from it toward the boy, so that it did not scent anything out of the ordinary.

Ted crept closer and closer.

So noiseless had been his approach that he had not given the game the faintest warning of his coming.

He slipped down behind a bowlder that covered him partly.

The grizzly had its back to him.

When it turned around it must catch a glimpse of him.

It could not fail to do that.

But at the moment it turned around, the young rough rider would get the chance that he was looking for.

When it turned it would present its head to him, and that was the point at which the young rough rider intended to fire.

Slowly the big beast swung around, just as Ted had expected.

The boy raised his rifle to his shoulder and his finger crooked around the trigger.

A moment more and the bear would turn so that it would present the point that the young rough rider was waiting to hit.

The grizzly now seemed to scent something in the air.

It raised its pointed head and sniffed.

It wheeled around and saw the sunlight gleam on the rifle barrel that stuck out from behind a rock a short distance away.

This was the moment that the young rough rider was waiting for.

The bear lowered its head and slouched forward, but the boy did not draw back or hesitate in the least.

The great beast was approaching him, and there was an angry light in its eyes, but Ted was not afraid.

He was perfectly confident that he could kill the animal before it got near enough to hurt him.

He waited for a moment more before firing.

He wanted his first bullet to do the work and he wanted to be sure of his shot.

Then, as the bear slouched closer and closer, he pulled the trigger.

Instead of the flash and report that the young rough rider had expected there was a dull click!

The rifle had not gone off!

And the bear, hearing that click, came closer, growling at the same time.

The young rough rider fired again and again—or, at least, he tried to fire with the other cartridges that he thought were in the repeating weapon.

A succession of clicks was the only result, and these unusual sounds seemed to have the effect of making the bear move toward him closer.

It growled with a growl that sounded like the roll of distant thunder and broke into a lumbering run—straight for the young rough rider.

It was so close to him now that Ted could feel the fetid smell that came from its body.

The boy darted away.

His weapon was useless except as a club; and what could a club do against a beast like that?

Growling with rage, the bear ran after him.

It seemed to be going slowly, but it moved at a much swifter pace than appearances indicated.

Ted moved back and back, turning around to face it now and then.

He had been caught in a place where there was a great shelf of rock behind him and the grizzly in front.

There seemed to be no escape from it, and his weapon, as he now discovered, was empty.

Crane's plot was turning out well.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAID OF THE MOUNTAIN.

The young rough rider did not understand how it was that the magazine of his rifle was empty.

He remembered having filled it with fresh shells the night before.

He could not load it now.

The web belt around his waist contained cartridges for a revolver, but none for a rifle.

Those in the magazine of the weapon would have been sufficient for all ordinary needs.

There was no time to think of any of these things.

The great grizzly was coming straight for the young rough rider.

Ted drew back until he was flush up against the face of rock that cut off his retreat.

He knew that a revolver bullet would have little effect on the heavy hide of this animal, but still he determined to sell his life as dearly as he could.

His shots would attract the attention of Ben Tremont or Bud Morgan, but the battle with the grizzly would be either lost or won before they arrived upon the scene.

He drew his weapon, and, as the grizzly charged upon him, he fired point blank at it.

It seemed to check the great animal for a moment.

The reader already knows that the young rough rider was a splendid shot with a pistol.

From the fact that the bear had lowered its head when it charged he had not been able to fire at the little, twinkling eyes, but he fired straight at the center of its forehead.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

His shots re-echoed along the rocky hillside.

The third shot seemed to stagger the bear.

The skull of a grizzly is so very thick that unless fired at short range and point-blank a bullet will not penetrate it.

Ted fired again and again until the chambers of his revolver were empty.

For a moment he thought that he had killed the bear or wounded it.

But no!

The big animal swayed from side to side for a moment and then came on again.

Ted dropped the useless revolver and seized his rifle with both hands.

He meant to use it as a club and beat the bear over the nose with it.

Perhaps he might be able to hold him off in this way for a moment.

His coolness had not deserted him, and he put his back to the rock and faced the bear with determination shining from his eyes.

The grizzly had been wounded by the shots that had been poured into it.

It was bleeding.

It growled in blind wrath and staggered forward, rearing up on its hind legs and reaching out with its forepaws.

Ted knew that once the animal caught him in that clutch there would be no hope for him.

Not even the ferocious mountain lion can stand the hug of a grizzly.

He was at bay, and he saw the swaying form move toward him.

A shot rang out over the young rough rider's shoulder.

The bear lurched and staggered.

"Stay where you are," called a clear, girl's voice. "I will take care of this animal."

Ted checked the impulse that he had to start out from the shelter of the rock at which he stood and see who it was behind him.

He surmised that the unknown, who had fired that shot, was going to fire again.

He was right.

Crack! rang out the rifle behind him.

The bear had lurched back on its hind paws from the effect of the first shot.

The second completed the work.

It had been well aimed.

It struck the beast full between the eyes and pierced the thick skull of the animal.

Down crashed the grizzly in a palpitating heap.

It clawed out wildly, but the blood was gushing from its mouth now.

The first rifle shot had evidently penetrated a lung.

Ted stepped forward, and again the sweet, girlish voice spoke behind him:

"Don't go near the bear yet," it said. "It is still dangerous."

The young rough rider looked.

Out of the cleft of a rock appeared a head and shoulders.

The hands were clasping a rifle.

The head and shoulders were those of a young girl, who might have been fifteen or sixteen years old.

Her hair fell down in sunny waves on her shoulders.

She was dressed in a fringed buckskin hunting suit.

A moment later she leaped upon top of the rock that sheltered her, and then dropped down and faced the young rough rider.

She was as graceful and as light as a fawn.

Her blue eyes were sparkling, and her face was flushed prettily.

"That was a narrow escape for you," she said.

"It was, indeed," said the boy. "I was going to fight it off with my gun as long as I could."

"Why didn't you fire at it?"

Ted threw open the magazine of his rifle and showed that it was empty.

The girl pursed her red lips together and whistled softly.

"Whew!" she said. "You were careless. You must be a very thoughtless young man."

"I was that time," said Ted, with a grave face.

He was thinking of the half-breed who had asked him for a drink of water in the middle of the night.

He was wondering if he could have had anything to do with the fact that his rifle was devoid of ammunition and useless at the time when it was most needed.

"I have you to thank for my life," the young rough rider continued. "I can say truthfully that that is the first time that anything like that has ever happened to me. You are a wonderful shot for a girl."

"I have practiced shooting lots," said the girl. "But I am surprised that Steve Crane should let a member of his party go around with a gun without any charge in it —especially when he knows that there are grizzlies about here."

"Do you know Steve Crane?"

The girl nodded her head.

"I know him," she said. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"I can't say that he is."

The girl looked at Ted for a moment in silence.

"I am glad that he isn't," she said. "I don't like him."

"Neither do I."

"You don't look like a fellow who would get on with Steve. I don't like Steve, and I think I like you."

The young rough rider felt himself flush a little.

This girl had very direct manners and a very straightforward way of speaking.

He looked at her, and for a moment their eyes met.

A thrill shot through the young rough rider.

There was no doubt that the girl had beautiful eyes.

He did not know what she was thinking, but she appeared very much confused a moment later.

Her face flushed rosily.

She drooped her long eyelashes and turned her head to one side.

"I don't know how to thank you for firing that shot——" began Ted, but the girl interrupted him.

"You don't need to thank me," she said. "It was nothing. But after this, remember to have your rifle loaded when you go out after bear. You don't look like a boy who would make a mistake like that. I can tell that you are not a tenderfoot."

"I didn't think I was a tenderfoot until I found that my rifle was empty when it should have been loaded."

"Well, good-by," said the girl. "I suppose that Steve Crane will be coming to look for you soon. I don't want to see him."

The girl flashed another glance from her blue eyes at him as she moved away.

She was so pretty and charming, and it was such a puzzle to find a girl like this in a place where he had supposed that there were no human beings whatever, that the young rough rider could not bear to have her go that way.

He ran after her, without knowing why he did so.

"Wait," he said. "Don't go off that way. After saving my life you need not run away like that. Are you afraid of me?"

The girl stood still and looked at him with a shy smile on her face.

"I don't know," she said, archly. "I wasn't afraid of the bear—at least, not very much. I don't know whether I am afraid of you or not."

"Well, why do you hurry away?"

"I must. I don't want to see Steve Crane."

"You needn't see him."

"Nor that half-breed that follows him like a dog, either."

"You needn't see him. I assure you that I don't want to see either of them."

"But you must go back to them. They are your guides. Good-by."

"They're not my guides."

The girl turned around in evident surprise.

"Not your guides?" she repeated.

"No; certainly not. They were at my camp last night, but they are gone now. I did not take any guides with me."

"Do you mean to say that you have come into the San Juan Mountains without hiring Steve Crane as a guide?"

"Certainly I do."

"People who come here always find that they need him for a guide."

"I didn't find any such thing."

"Does he know that you are here?"

"Yes; he arrived at my camp last night with a fellow whom he is guiding through the hills. He wanted me to hire him also, I think."

"And you refused?"

"Certainly."

"What did Steve say?"

"What could he say?—nothing!"

"Do you mean to say that he let you go into these mountains without hiring him as a guide?" The girl was plainly interested now.

She rested her rifle on the ground and came a step nearer to the young rough rider.

"He made some talk about it. He seemed to think that he had a monopoly on these mountains. But I thought differently."

"Did you fight about it?"

Ted thought that a rather joyful light shone in the eyes of the girl.

"No; we didn't fight. He challenged me to shoot with him. I said that I would pay him the money that he demanded if he won."

"Oh, you did? And did you shoot?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"He didn't get the money."

"What! You didn't beat him at the shooting, did you?"

"Yes—I beat him."

"He's the best shot around here."

"He may be, but he was beaten—he acknowledged it himself."

"You must be a wonderful shot."

"I see that you are in doubt—that you don't know whether to believe me or not," said Ted, with a smile.

"Oh, no, no, no—I didn't mean that."

"Yes you did mean that. But it is true that I defeated him."

"It seems almost impossible. He thinks himself such a good shot. I can shoot pretty well——"

"I should say you can. You nailed that grizzly in fine shape."

"But I can't shoot as well as he can."

"You could come pretty near it if you tried."

The girl drew a revolver from her belt and looked up the side of the hill.

Up near the top grew a cedar tree.

One limb, evidently dead, stuck out from the rest of the tree, bare and leafless.

"You see that limb?" she said. "See me hit it!"

She fired, and the dropping pieces of bark showed that she had not missed her mark.

"You want me to try and do the same?" said the young rough rider. "I am willing."

He emptied the shells out of his revolver and slipped in fresh cartridges.

Then he raised it and pointed at the limb.

"You see that twig out at the end of the limb?" he said, imitating the girl's manner a little and smiling frankly. "See me hit it!"

The revolver cracked, and, wonderful to behold! the twig at which he had aimed and which had been clearly silhouetted against the sky, disappeared.

The bullet had cut it off.

"Bully!" cried the girl, clapping her hands together.

"I guess you can beat Steve Crane, all right. I have seen him do good shooting, but I have never seen him make a shot like that."

"You believe me now?" smiled Ted.

"I believed you anyway. But, tell me—what did Steve say when you beat him?"

"He didn't say much of anything that I heard."

"Didn't he get mad."

"I dare say he did. He pitched his camp with ours, but he and the half-breed and the boy who was with them—all three lit out in the middle of the night. When we got up in the morning they were not there."

The girl's face grew suddenly grave.

"Where was your rifle during the night?" she asked.

"Right beside me."

"Could Crane or the Indian have touched it while you were sleeping?"

"They might have."

"Was it loaded yesterday?"

"I remember loading it distinctly."

"Then it is that villain Crane—look out for him! He will do you all the harm he can."

"Why should he try to do me harm?"

"He has a reason. He wants to guide all the people who come to hunt in these mountains—he and that half-breed, who is his underling and would commit murder at his command. It is his boast that no one ever hunts here without paying him anything."

"He's going to break the rule this time. I am going to hunt here, and I'm not going to pay him anything, either."

"Look out for him. He's a dangerous man. It is his habit to scare people out of the mountains here. He knows too much to make an open attack on them, especially if they are people who have friends elsewhere who would make an inquiry about them in case they came to harm. But it has been noticed that anyone who went into these mountains without hiring Steve Crane as a guide has had something happen to him. One was clawed to death by a panther. It was found that the lock of his rifle was broken so that he could not fire it. No one ever knew who broke the lock of the rifle. Another fell off a cliff and was killed. No one ever knew how he came to slip off. Now I am in earnest. Are you from the East?"

"I come from Texas direct," said the young rough rider. "I run a ranch there."

"You look like a borderer. You know the dangers there are in a place like this. What is your name?"

"Ted Strong."

"Well, Ted Strong, I have saved your life, you say. I want you to do something in return for that."

"What is it?"

"Promise to go right out of these mountains as quick as you can. You are in danger here."

"I'm sorry," said Ted, "but I can't promise you that."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"It is funny, but I am rather glad that you wouldn't promise that. But, remember my warning. Good-by."

Before the young rough rider knew it, the girl had leaped off among the rocks.

He called after her, and she turned once as she ran away.

"If you see Crane," she said, "tell him that you have a girl guide and that you don't need his services."

Ted ran after the girl, but she had a start and he found that she knew the ground a great deal better than he did.

"Who are you?" he called. "Tell me who you are."

The girl smiled back at him once more.

"I'm just your girl guide," she said. "You may call me the maid of the mountains."

She darted behind a large rock.

Ted ran after her, but when he turned around the side of the rock she was nowhere in sight, search as he might.

The maid of the mountains had disappeared as mysteriously as she had appeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WARNING.

It took the young rough rider some little time to find his two companions.

As for the girl, he soon gave up hopes of finding her again.

She had disappeared as completely and utterly as though she had been a ghost.

The young rough rider searched around among the rocks and clefts in the mountain side without being able to find the faintest trace of her.

Indeed, had it not been the body of the great bear lying there with the evidence of her marksmanship in two gaping wounds in its head and breast, he might have thought that she was indeed a vision conjured by his fancy out of the solitude of the mountain.

But the dead grizzly was proof, and he had to let it go at that.

He found Ben and Bud together.

Bud had had a long chase after his grizzly and had finally lost it.

Ben had been trying to urge the mule forward along the path and had found it was as stubborn and pig headed as burros can sometimes be.

They listened to Ted's tale of his adventures with open-eyed astonishment.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud. "If yore rifle was

empty yer kin lay it ter thet thar Steve Crane or thet yaller-hided half-breed thet he had with him."

"That is what the girl said," remarked Ted. "She said the fact that my rifle was empty was a trick of theirs."

"She was right," said Bud. "I saw you load thet there rifle myself."

"If you saw me load it, that settles it. It was a trick of theirs and that was the reason that the half-breed was crawling so close to me when he woke me up and said that he wanted a drink of water."

"We orter hev put a guard out when we hed sich reptyles as thet in our camp," said Bud. "They air no gol-dinged good. Nuther is thet feller they was guidin' around through ther mountings—Clif Jackson, or whatever yer calls him."

"I'd like to see the girl," muttered Ben, who had seated himself and commenced to smoke when he found that the mule was going no further. "I'd like to see her. She must be a peach."

"Well, if you can find her you are welcome to do it," said the young rough rider. "It's more than I can do."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully enough.

The big grizzly was skinned and the claws, as well as the hide, taken as a trophy.

Then the party of the three young rough riders passed further up into the mountains.

They were well repaid for the trouble of their climb.

There were other reasons besides the desire for game that were prompting the young rough rider to penetrate into this country.

He had heard that it was rich in mineral deposits, although no prospector had ever surveyed it.

But several mining men had commissioned the young rough rider to look over the country for them and report to them.

Although little more than a boy in years, Ted had some little experience in the mining business and was skilled in mineralogy.

He knew where to look for the outcroppings of ore and what indicated a pay dirt.

On the present occasion, he noted more than one place where the indications were sufficient to have warranted mining operations.

He took several samples with him, and, as he moved slowly forward, he made a rough map of the country through which he traveled.

The United States Government had issued a rough survey map of the place, but the young rough rider found that it was wrong in many particulars, and that the surveyor who had made it had not gone far into the San Juan Range, but had indulged in a good deal of guessing in regard to it.

The scenery was beautiful and the air was of the pure, bracing quality that is only to be found in mountainous localities.

That night the three boys camped on a sheltered ledge of rock, thousands of feet above the sea level.

Below them stretched a rugged mass of peaks, some of them wooded and some bare and rocky.

Before them, to the northward, were still higher ridges and crests.

Viewed in the rosy glow cast by the setting sun, it seemed a wonderland, full of mysterious beauties.

But as the young rough rider sank to sleep that night on his bed of pine needles, he was not thinking of any of the beauties of scenery or of the prospects of gold or of game to be found in the mountains.

The image that was uppermost in his mind was that of a blue-eyed girl, clad in a buckskin hunting costume and holding a rifle in her hand.

For a good part of the night the young rough riders took turns watching; but toward morning they became convinced that their situation was a safe one and that nobody could approach without wakening them.

The only way to get to it was over a bare, rocky ridge that sloped up at a sharp angle.

There were no wild animals near.

The crest they were on was too high and bare of trees for that, and so, toward morning, they all three laid themselves down to sleep in security.

The young rough rider dreamed for the first time in many nights.

Usually his sleep was of the dreamless variety brought on by an active day, spent wholly in the open air.

But this night he dreamed and his dreams were all of the mysterious maid of the mountain—the girl who, after having saved his life, had run away from him and defied his best efforts to find her.

Again, in his dreams, he saw the grizzly facing him.

Again, he heard the rifle crack behind him and turned to see the face of the girl peering through the cleft in the rocks through which she had fired.

Then it seemed to him that the scene changed.

He was on the banks of a swiftly moving mountain torrent.

He was watching the waters roar past him in a turbulent flood, when he saw the form of a human being sweep down on the current.

A soft voice cried out to him.

He looked, and saw that it was the girl who was being carried past him.

She held out her hands to him and looked at him appealingly, as though she were pleading with him to come to her aid.

He plunged into the stream after her, but as he did so, she disappeared below the surface.

While these and other wild dreams were passing

through the mind of the sleeping boy, a figure was slipping up across the slope.

It was the girl whom Ted had met that day.

She was moving as noiselessly as though she herself were the creature of a dream and would fade away with the light of day.

No man could have come up that slope without making a sound, and yet this mysterious girl seemed able to do it.

A moment later, she was in the camp of the young rough riders.

She gazed at each of the boys, looking last and longest at Ted himself.

There was a smile on her face, but it was a smile that had in it as much sadness as pleasure or mirth.

She turned and slipped away as noiselessly as she came

The shadows that filled the valley below seemed to swallow her up again.

Ted awoke with the first rays of the rising sun.

As he woke, his hand touched something that had been lying on the ground close beside it.

It was a slip of paper.

Holding it up he saw that something was written on it. It was in a handwriting that might have been that of a boy. It ran as follows:

"Yesterday I warned you, but you took no heed. Now I warn again. An ambush is laid for you at the hill of the three pines. Beware! You will not be frightened out of the mountains, but, at least, you can be careful. Look out for Crane, the guide. He has determined that you shall go no further. You have enemies in the mountains, but you have a friend as well. This is from your girl guide."

Ted read it through twice, turned it over and over and glanced about the camp.

His two friends were still asleep and everything was quiet; but he knew that the girl guide had been near him while he slept.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HILL OF THE THREE PINES.

"They air sure ter come this here way."

"Ugh, sure!"

"They're goin' on inter ther mountings an' this here is ther only pass that they kin climb."

"Ugh!"

"An' it won't be long till they get here, nuther."

"Not long."

The two who were holding this interesting conversation were Steve Crane and his half-breed friend, Yellow Jack.

Crane, as was his custom, was doing most of the talking.

The half-breed was responding in grunts rather than words.

Both of them were puffing away at little, black pipes.

They were stretched luxuriously out at their ease, and the rifles which they usually carried in their hands were lying on the ground beside them.

The place where they were reclining is probably one of the most wonderful pieces of mountain scenery in the whole country.

They were at the top of a hill, on the crest of which grew three pine trees.

Each of the three trees was straight and tall.

They looked like three sentinels guarding the valley beneath.

On one side of the hill there was an easy slope.

On the other, the slope was so steep as to be something nearer a precipice than a hillside.

At the bottom of it, a hundred feet below, was the trail.

It was narrow at this point, so narrow that only one man would walk abreast on it.

On the other side of the trail, was a steep mountain that could not be ascended except on all fours.

The trail wound around the foot, but the experienced traveler could see that in its windings it was gradually taking him up higher and higher among the chain of lofty peaks of which the hill of the three pines was the first.

There was something else on the top of the hill besides the two men and the three pines.

It was something that would have riveted the attention of anyone, from the first.

It was a great, round stone, perhaps five or six feet in diameter.

It was poised on the very edge of the hill.

It seemed that the merest touch would send it crashing down into the trail.

From its size it could be seen that it would block the trail completely and kill anyone who happened to be passing that way.

It had been lying there for ages on the top of that lone hill, always threatening the pass beneath but never falling upon it.

But with each successive year, with each springtime's rain, it had worn smoother and rounder.

The earth had been washed more and more away from beneath it.

At first, it had been securely bedded in the ground, but now it was above it, resting on a single little hillock.

Only one point touched the ground.

It lay there like a gigantic marble, ready to be rolled off.

And preparation had been made for rolling it off.

On the ground beside it lay a shovel, and in front of it it could be seen that the earth had been shoveled away so as to make it still easier to roll it down the hill.

Indeed, the soil had been shoveled away so much that the stone would have rolled down of itself without a touch had not it been held in place with a heavy stick of timber.

This stick had been shoved in under it in the same manner in which a wagoner chocks his wheels when his vehicle is at a standstill on a steep hillside and he does not want it to slip down.

This was the handiwork of Crane, who now lay beside it, puffing at his pipe and looking at it with a great deal of satisfaction reflected in his face.

"You'd never 'a' thought o' that," he said, puffing at his pipe and indicating it with a movement of his elbow.

"Ugh!" grunted the half-breed.

"No; you see yore only an ignorant savidge, so ter speak."

"Ugh!"

"Yore idee of gittin' these here fellers outer they way would be ter hit 'em on ther head or shoot 'em."

"Ugh!"

"That's right. But I go in fer something a leedle more civilized than that. Yer see if I shot 'em and people came here ter look fer 'em, it would be found out thet they hed been shot."

"What difference?"

"A whole lot of difference. This here young rough rider is a kinder important duck. I have hearn about him an' read about him afore now. He owns ranches here an' thar, an' he has a hull lot of rich an' influential friends, see."

The half-breed said nothing, but, casting aside his pipe, bit off a chew of tobacco from a black plug and began munching away on it contentedly.

"Yer see if they came prowlin' around here arter him an' found thet he was shot there would be trouble brewin' fer us. There'd be a warrant out fer us, an' they might send some soldiers up from ther fort arter us. They might not get us, but all ther same, our graft as guides ter this here district would be gone. No one is comin' up here without I guide him, an' I've got a private grudge agin' ther young rough rider. He's too good a shot ter be movin' around here alone. If he ain't wiped out by some grizzly he'll be here, an' this here rock will fall on him."

"Him kill grizzly yesterday. Saw body."

"You saw the body?"

"Um! Heap big. Saw girl near there."

"What! Did old Winters' daughter see ther young rough rider?"

"Talk to him. Make heap talk. Make pretty eyes. So—so!"

The half-breed rolled his eyes about in what he conceived to be an imitation of the girl's. Needless to say, it was a bad one.

In the meantime, Crane swore under his breath.

"I wish she hadn't seen him. She's ther kind thet would get stuck on him. She never sees a man except you, an' me, an' her dad."

"Heap pretty girl—like to kiss, um!"

"You'd like ter kiss her, yer yaller brute. Yer'd better not try it. She's fer me, understand? She's goin' ter be Mrs. Crane some o' these days. She won't see ther young rough rider no more, though. But I wish she hadn't seen him. Where were you?"

"Hidin' in bush. Saw her run away. Boy run after. She lose him."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Crane; "she'll lose any of them up among these here hills. She's a slick one, all right."

"Me shoot boy only you say no."

"That's right. This way is the best. If this rock hits him there won't be nothin' left of him. An' it won't be our fault, will it, thet ther rock happened ter fall down on him? It will serve him right fer goin' up here without a guide. It's just an accident, but people will say thet if he had had a guide with him as knowed ther country, it wouldn't have happened."

"Ugh!" was the only answer of the half-breed.

"Now that ther gal has seen him," muttered Crane, "he must git outer ther way sure. I have planned fer years thet she is ter be mine, an' if thet young whelp got nosin' around her much, she wouldn't hev no use fer me. She ain't none too fond of me already."

"Other white boy still wait in trees," said the half-breed, with a grin.

"Oh! yer means Jackson. He's a fool."

"Make big talk."

"That's what he does. I put him down there and told him to watch for a deer. I did that to get him out of the way. I want ter get through with these three rough riders, an' I don't want him ter know anythin' about it. Arter it's all over I'll take him where he kin kill a few deer, and then take him back outer ther mountings. I guess as how he has had about enough of them already."

They lay there in silence for a little while, smoking, but still keeping a close watch on the path.

If rumors about him were correct, this was not the first plot of the kind that Crane had participated in.

He seemed to have no conscience whatsoever.

He lay there smoking as contentedly as though he had never planned an evil deed in his life.

Suddenly he leaned forward and looked down into the pass.

A figure was coming along it, but it was not the figure that he was looking for.

It was that of the mysterious maid of the mountains —the girl about whom he had been talking

She was coming along at a run.

Instead of going through the pass she turned sharply to one side and plunged through a growth of bushes.

Crane leaped to his feet and saw her running along in a different direction.

He could not see the cause of her hurry, but a moment later another figure came into sight.

It was the figure of Clif Jackson, the boy who had hired him to take him through the mountains.

Crane burst into a volley of curses when he saw this unexpected sight.

He started down the hillside to meet the girl.

After him ran the half-breed.

Just at that moment, the girl caught her foot in a tangle of roots and fell on the ground.

Jackson, who did not see the two figures on the brow of the hill, ran toward her with a yell of triumph.

A moment later he had caught up to her and was by her side.

CHAPTER X.

JACKSON SHOOTS AT A NEW KIND OF DEER.

Clif Jackson had been left by his two guides in the midst of a thick tangle of underbrush.

He had been told that if he would lie in wait there long enough a deer would pass, and he would get a shot at it.

As has been seen, they left him there purely for purposes of their own.

They intended to lay an ambush for the young rough rider, and they put him off with that as a good excuse, little caring whether he killed a deer or not, so long as he did not follow them for that afternoon.

Clif lay there quietly for a long time, watching and waiting, hoping to see the brown form of a deer appear through the tangle at any moment.

He was beginning to get tired, and had laid down his rifle to stretch himself and take a more comfortable resting position, when the sound of a twig breaking, not far away from him, brought him to attention at once. He snatched up his rifle and crouched forward.

The trees grew thickly all about him, and between the trees there was a heavy growth of underbrush.

He could not see any great distance, but he stared with all his might.

Another twig broke.

It was somewhere in front of him.

It was nearer than before.

An animal was coming nearer.

He leaned forward, with his rifle half raised to his shoulder, ready to fire at the first sight of anything.

Since the deer which he had pursued vainly and which the young rough rider had shot, he had not seen anything larger than a partridge to shoot at.

He had come into that country solely on account of the game that was to be found there.

So far, he had been very unfortunate.

He was determined to take something back with him to show for his hunt, and he was ready to shoot at anything now.

Something brown flickered through the trees in front of him.

This was enough for Jackson.

He raised his rifle to his shoulder and let fly, straight at it.

His hands were trembling with excitement, and that weapon, loosely held, kicked hard against his shoulder.

He was sure that he had hit whatever he aimed at, however, and he did not mind the pain.

He leaped forward to see what it was that he had hit.

He was dashing ahead, looking for the deer, when something seemed to rise out of the ground right in front of him.

It was the form of a brown-clad girl, who had been crouching there.

She snatched the rifle out of the hands of the boy and cast it on the ground behind her.

Clif fell back a step and gasped with astonishment.

Of all things in the world, a pretty girl was the thing that he least expected to see at that moment.

And this girl was as pretty as any girl he had ever seen.

She seemed to be a great deal stronger and more agile than the ordinary girl, for she had torn the rifle out of his grasp as though it had been a straw, and she had leaped to her feet in a singularly graceful and light manner.

She was staring at the boy with a good deal of anger and contempt showing in her deep-blue eyes.

"Well!" she said, "you are the fellow who fired at me, are you?"

Clif was too much surprised to answer coherently.

"I—I don't know," he stammered.

"Well, you should know. You fired that rifle off a moment ago."

"Yes."

"Well, you sent the bullet within a foot of my head."

"I didn't mean to."

"I didn't mean to," mimicked the girl. "What did you do it for, then?"

"I thought you were a deer."

"You thought I was a deer, did you? You didn't stop to look. You just blazed away. If you were any kind of a shot you would have hit me. I'll tell you something."

"Really I beg your pardon," said Jackson, who was beginning to recover himself somewhat.

"Begging my pardon won't do any good. But I'll tell you something. It is a piece of good advice. It may help you to hit any deer you meet."

"What is it?"

"When you see a deer don't shoot at it. Fire in some other direction. You are more likely to hit it that way."

The girl broke into a laugh.

Her anger, which had shown at the first, was passing away now, and she seemed to regard this boy with nothing other than a good-natured contempt.

On his part, Jackson had recovered himself.

He noticed how pretty this girl was, and he felt himself immediately attracted toward her.

He thought that he was considerable of a ladies' man and he had often been told by his friends that he was good-looking and attractive.

He was vain enough to think that any girl would be

fascinated by him, and as he judged that this backwoods girl would be a simple maiden, unacquainted with men and the ways of the world, he thought that she would fall an easy victim to his charms.

"I wish you would give me lessons in shooting," he said. "I should be happy to take them from you.'

"You need them," said the girl. "I suppose that you are the fellow whom Steve Crane is guiding through the hills here. Tell him that Ethel Winters said that he ought to take better care of you after this."

"Do you live here, Miss Winters?" said Jackson, lifting his hat.

"I live near here, on the top of one of these hills," said the girl. "Where are your guides?"

"They have gone to beat up some deer. They will be here soon."

"They left you here alone to shoot the deer as they drove them past?"

"Yes."

"Terrible for the deer!"

Jackson did not see the sarcasm in this remark.

He saw that the girl was moving away and he stepped after her.

The beauty of the girl attracted him strongly, and the thought that she was merely the daughter of some ignorant trapper made him bold.

"Won't you let me go with you?" he said.

"No," said the girl. "You had better stop and watch for deer."

She smiled as she said this.

The smile was at Jackson's slim chances of getting any deer there.

He thought that it was a smile of encouragement.

He stepped close to her side.

"You are not going to leave me that way?" he said.

As he spoke he passed his arm around the waist of the girl and tried to kiss her.

The girl pushed him away.

"How dare you!" she cried.

Clif ran forward and tried to grasp her again.

This time he received a slap on the ear that made it ring.

He lost his temper.

"You little minx!" he cried. "I'll kiss you a dozen times for that."

She saw the look on his face and she turned and ran.

He ran after.

She would have outdistanced him in a little while, as she could run quicker than he could, but after she had darted across a clear space, her foot caught in a root and she fell to the ground.

As she arose again, Jackson was at her side.

He threw his arm around her waist and tried to kiss her.

At the same moment another figure appeared from behind a tree and a stunning blow struck him on the jaw.

He fell to the ground.

CHAPTER XI.

TED APPEARS.

The man who had knocked Clif Jackson down was Crane, the guide.

He stood over him now, his face black with anger.

"What do you mean, yer young whelp?" he said. "Let this gal alone."

Jackson's head was still buzzing when he climbed to his feet.

His temper was always fiery, but now he had lost it completely.

"What do you mean by striking me?" he said.

"I mean that you are to keep your hands off that girl."

"What business is that of yours?"

"All the business in the world. She is going to marry me."

Clif glanced at the girl.

She had drawn a little away and was silent, although her face was flushed and hot.

The boy looked at the guide again.

The difference between the two was so great that the thing that the guide had said was absurd.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he said. "That's funny."

"What's funny?"

"The idea of your marrying a girl like that."

"Take care what you say!"

Crane took a step toward the boy, and, as he did so, Jackson leaped at him and struck him smack across the face.

"I'll teach you to strike me!" he said. "Take that!"

Crane was surprised and blinded by the blow.

He staggered back with a howl of rage.

Jackson pulled a revolver out of his belt.

"I'm going to teach you a lesson," he grated. "You thought you could strike me, did you? You don't know me. I never took that from any man, you big coward!"

"What are you going to do with that gun?"

As he said this, Crane was stealthily creeping toward him, an evil gleam shining in his cunning eyes.

"I'll show you," panted Clif. "For very little I would shoot you dead. You struck me, and I won't take that from anyone. I'm going to mark you so that you'll remember me."

"You will, will you?"

Nearer and nearer crept the guide, but by such slow moves that the boy did not know that he was changing his position.

Jackson's finger crooked around the weapon, and he sighted it for the ear of his guide.

In another instant he would have fired, but already Crane had got as near as he wished to get.

He leaped upon the boy.

Jackson tried to fire, but the revolver was twisted out of his grasp.

He received a punch in the face that sent him staggering, another crack over the head that felled him to the ground.

Crane slipped the weapon into his own belt.

He stood looking down at the boy with an expression of the greatest contempt for him on his face.

"I've worked for tenderfeet afore now," he said, "but I'll be gol durned if yer not ther worst thet I ever worked fer."

Jackson got slowly to his feet again.

He was weaponless.

He knew that in physical strength he was no match for this brawny guide, who had already bowled him over twice without the slightest effort.

"Seein' as how yer are in my care, I'll see yer back outer this," continued Crane. "But I wanter talk ter this young lady here, do yer understand?"

"I didn't know that she was anything to you?" said Jackson, in a husky voice.

"Waal, seein' as you didn't, I won't say no more about it."

"He tried to shoot me for a deer," said the girl, with a laugh.

This laugh was more than Jackson could stand.

He turned on his heel and strode away.

"Where be yer going'?" shouted Crane, after him.

"Back to the cabin," said Jackson, without turning around.

Crane laughed as he saw him stride away.

"He's a fool kid," he said, "but he won't do yer no more harm, Ethel."

"He couldn't have done me any harm."

"Isn't it any harm ter kiss yer?"

"He didn't kiss me."

Crane looked around and saw that Jackson was already out of sight.

He was alone with the girl.

He sidled up a little closer to her.

"Look here, Eth," he said. "Isn't it about time that I had a right to kiss yer?"

"No," she said, "it isn't."

"How long air yer goin' ter keep up this sorter game?"

"What sort of a game?"

"This standin' me off an' purtendin' that you haven't no use fer me."

"That isn't any pretense."

"It isn't, eh? You know that you are to marry me, some time."

"I don't know anything of the sort."

"Your father promised me."

"My father promised you because he is old and feeble and you have him under your thumb. That's all."

"Don't yer think thet yer father knows what is best fer yer, gal?"

"No; he has been a trapper all his life, living here in the mountains. I have seen a little more of the world."

"That lady that took yer away with her one summer ter Cimarron spiled yer. She sent yer back here with a lot of fool notions in yer head."

"She sent me back here with my eyes opened. As long as my father lives I will stay here with him. He has no one but me. He has lived in the hills all his life and he is sick now. But after——"

"After that yer'll marry me."

"I'll leave this place."

"Yer'll marry me."

"Never! I heard you talking with Yellow Jack. You were plotting to kill a man. Do yer think that I would marry a murderer."

"Yer've seen ther young rough rider. Yer stuck on him."

"How dare you talk that way?"

"I dare that, and this, too."

He ran up to the girl and threw his arm around her waist.

She struggled, but Crane was a good deal stronger than Clif Jackson.

He drew her head upward and tried to kiss her.

But now, another figure appeared from the underbrush.

It was the young rough rider.

He seized Crane by the shoulder and turned him around.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF THE HALF-BREED.

Crane cast but one look at the young rough rider.

Then he rushed at him with the fury of a lion.

Released from his arms, Ethel Winters stepped back and leaned against a tree.

Crane thought that he could handle Ted as easily as he had handled Jackson.

At first glance the young rough rider did not look any larger than the other boy, although a close observer would have seen that he was a great deal heavier and more muscular.

He was not in the least afraid of Crane, and as the guide rushed at him he made a half turn, threw one arm around him and half lifted him.

Crane was swung around on the hip bone of the young rough rider and sent spinning through the air on the other side.

The rush that he had made carried him onward, and, had he not been very agile, he would have fallen to the ground.

He managed to catch on his feet, and, wheeling around, made another rush at the boy.

He did not know how Ted had handled him, but he was determined that it should not happen again.

It did not happen that way again, but something else happened that was no more to his taste.

The young rough rider dodged to one side this time and met him with a straight punch in the jaw.

Had not Crane been very strong he would have been knocked down.

As it was, his head was rocked back and a thousand stars danced before his eyes.

Ethel had never seen any fighting like this.

At each rush on the part of Crane she had expected to see the young rough rider crushed to the ground.

Instead of that, his opponent had got the worst of it.

It stirred her blood.

She clasped her hands together and cried out in her excitement.

Again Crane dashed at his antagonist.

He determined that the young rough rider should not dodge him this time.

He spread out his arms wide, thinking to catch him in them.

He thought that if he once had the boy in his grasp he could crush him with a bearlike hug.

But the young rough rider was wary and watchful.

This opening that Crane unwittingly gave him, was the thing that he was looking for.

He dashed in between the outstretched arms.

Crane tried to catch him, but before he could do so, the boy landed two stunning blows full on the point of his jaw.

He went down backward, his feet flying up in the air.

It seemed as if the force of the blows had lifted him clear from his feet.

He was not stunned, as a weaker man might have been.

Even as he fell, he was reaching for a revolver.

He clutched it, but the young rough rider saw the movement.

The boy threw himself upon the guide and grasped him by the wrist.

Crane found that he was caught in a grip of iron.

He struggled and kicked.

Locked in a close embrace, the two rolled over and over.

Now Ted was underneath.

Now he was above.

He reached forth with his other hand and struck the guide twice in the face.

Crane was covered with blood now.

His lips were split open, his nose was smashed and bleeding, one of his ears was smashed so that it bled and one of his eyes was half closed.

He still struggled.

Now the revolver came out, but as it came out, Ted shifted his grip and caught it by the barrel.

Over they rolled again, each having hold of the revolver, each struggling for its possession.

As he came above the second time, Crane managed to get one knee on the chest of the young rough rider.

He was half blinded with the blood that was streaming down his face and he was crazy with rage.

He struck at the boy with his free hand.

Ted caught him by the wrist and the blow did not land.

Over they rolled again.

Now Ted was on top.

With a mighty wrench he tore the revolver from the grasp of his antagonist.

He did not shift his grip on it, but still holding it by the long barrel, brought it down on Crane's head with crushing force.

The guide lay quite still.

He was stunned.

Ted rose to his feet and shook himself.

As he did so, there was a cry from Ethel.

Out of the bushes sprang another figure.

It was the half-breed.

He was showing his long, yellow teeth in a grin of rage.

In his hand he held a long knife.

But, by this time, the young rough rider's blood was up.

Everything seemed a red mist before him.

He could see the half-breed leaping forward through this red mist.

He could see the gleaming knife.

He sprang forward and struck the half-breed a blow that nothing human could stand against.

Down on his knees went the half-breed.

The young rough rider caught his wrist and twisted it until he cried out with pain and dropped the knife.

The half-breed leaped to his feet and Ted rushed at him.

Yellow Jack had never met with anything like this furious boy.

He turned and ran.

After him went the young rough rider.

At lightning speed, they dashed through the underbrush down to the trail.

The half-breed heard the feet of the boy pounding behind him.

He fled up the trail with wild bounds.

As he did so, there was an ominous sound from the top of the hill of the three pines.

First there was a crack, then a dull roar.

Ted looked up and could see a great bowlder bounding down the steep side of the hill.

He was barely in time to stop and drop back. The half-breed saw it, too. He heard the noise and he saw the bowlder with a great mass of earth that it had brought with it.

It was coming down on him directly. He was underneath it.

He turned and tried to draw back.

His face had blanched to the color of ashes.

He tossed his hands in the air and uttered a wild cry.

He tried to start back, but he was too late.

The young rough rider saw the rolling mass settle over him.

There was a roar like the roar of a cannon.

A great cloud of dust rose into the air.

When it settled, there was a heap of débris filling the path.

In the midst of it lay the bowlder.

And underneath that bowlder, somewhere, was all that there was left of Yellow Jack, the half-breed.

He had been caught in Crane's trap.

The stick that had held the stone in place had proved too weak and had broken just in time to precipitate the great stone upon him and crush him.

It seemed like a judgment from Heaven.

Ted stood looking at it for a moment and turned to see Ethel Winters at his side.

She was pale and there were tears on her cheeks.

"They meant that for you," she said. "That is what I warned you against. I heard them talking about it and left the note."

"Who are you?" said Ted, looking at the girl.

"The daughter of an old trapper who is lying sick in a cabin near by."

The girl was swaying to and fro.

What she had seen was too much for her.

If the young rough rider had not caught her in his arms she would have fallen to the ground.

When she had come to and he went back to look for Crane, he had disappeared.

It was a long time before Crane was seen around that part of the country again.

Ted had been making a detour to reconnoiter the hill of the three pines when he came upon Crane and the girl in the woods.

Bud and Ben, who had been left behind, appeared on the trail a little later. The girl led them to a cabin far up in the hills, where she introduced him to her father, an old man who had lived there hunting and trapping since the death of his wife many years before.

Since he had been failing in health, the girl had kept him comfortable, nursing him and killing game for their support herself.

Before the young rough rider left that part of the country he saw that the old man was comfortably fixed in a house in Cimarron, which was the nearest town.

Ethel had friends there who took care of her, and the young rough rider bade her good-by. But, although he did not expect to, he was destined to see her again soon in the future and to meet with a series of thrilling adventures in which she played a prominent part.

THE END.

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